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The Craftsman's Memory

Billy Budd in the Context of the Earlier Novels

by Stuart Levine

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A successful play and effective opera share the title of Melville's unfinished last novel, **Billy Budd**. Both are built on what was in the era of their creation the attractive "new" view of the author's intention. The young author of novels published in the late 1840s and early 1850s had been dismayed by injustice, bigotry, hypocrisy, and by a growing sense of meaninglessness, of ambiguity. But the old man who was at work on **Billy Budd**, according to this interpretation, had finally become reconciled to the way things ran. The novella was seen as a "testament of acceptance." God's in his heaven. All's right with the world.

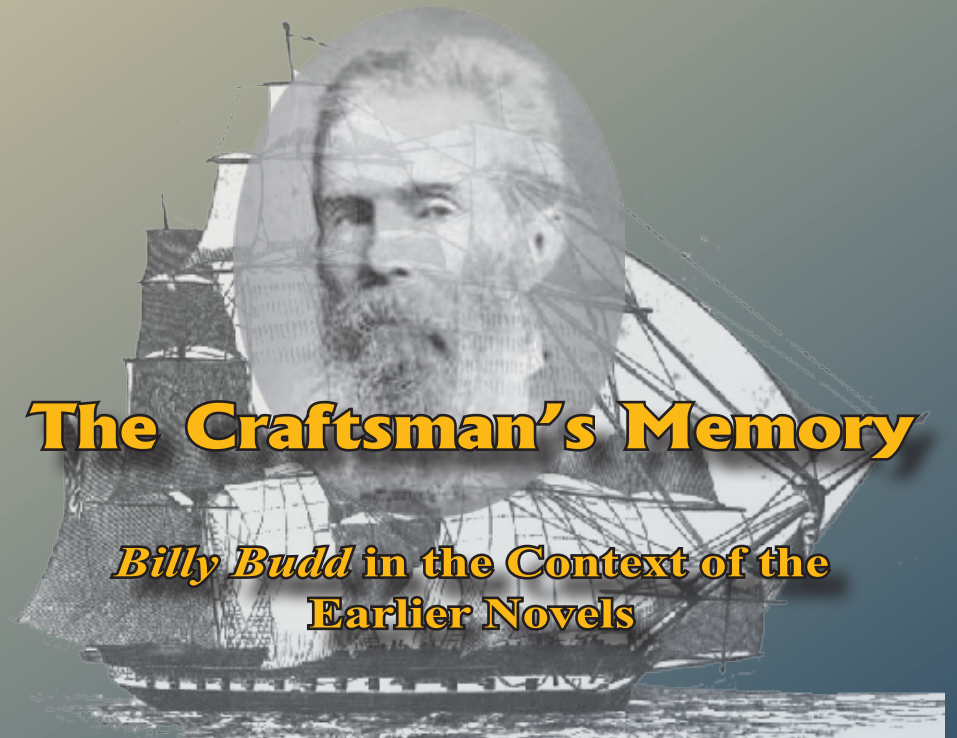
The Craftsman's Memory is one of the first explanations of why this interpretation is illogical. If young Billy is associated with Jesus, as critics of all stripes agree, the "testament of acceptance" reading would seem to argue, "We can't have these holy types running loose. We must have order. String him up!"

This concise study also apparently the first to notice another ambiguity, the paradoxical innocence of the famously depraved character Claggart when he appears before Captain Vere to accuse Billy.

The Craftsman's Memory argues its case by carefully assembling recurring features of the earlier novels that are still present in **Billy Budd**. Having the scholarly leg-work so readily available should make life a little easier for Melville scholars and Melville lovers.

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COVER: From an 1885 photo of Melville by George Gardner, superimposed over an engraved image of the USS United States, a heavy frigate given its name by George Washington. Launched in 1797, it was still in active service in 1843, when the young Herman Melville signed on to it in Hawaii to complete his long journey home from his South Sea adventures.

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Wording of the Original Title Page, Harvard University Archives.

THE CRAFTSMAN'S MEMORY

A discussion of technical devices in the early novels
of Melville which continue into *Billy Budd*

Stuart Levine

Honors Essay

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Other books by Stuart Levine

Killing in Okaraygua, 2012.

(With Susan F. Levine) *Edgar Allan Poe, Critical Theory/
The Major Documents*, 2009, 2010.

(With Susan F. Levine) *Edgar Allan Poe, Eureka*, 2004.

(With Susan F. Levine) *Edgar Allan Poe/Thirty-Two Stories*,
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edition of the complete short stories), 1976, 1979, 1990.

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(with a study of Caffin by SGL), 1970.

(With Nancy O. Lurie) *The American Indian Today*, 1968,
1970.

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To Dad



Herman Melville in 1846 or 1847, from a portrait by Asa Twitchell.

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Note

Although the page numbers in the footnotes have been taken from the editions listed in the Bibliography, I have, in the cases of more important references, mentioned the chapter location in my text. This was done to facilitate reading for those who are using editions other than those in the Bibliography. The Center for Editions of American Authors "Approved Text" volumes of Melville come from Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker, General Editors, and G. Thomas Tan-selle, Bibliographical Editor. A digital *Moby-Dick* is online, the work of Haskell Springer and Samuel Otter.

I had been instructed to use the edition of **Billy Budd** edited by F. Barron Freeman (Harvard University Press, 1948). Today that volume is no longer used. I found it easy to locate passages (generally in the Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, Jr. edition [University of Chicago Press, 1962]) by going on line to "melville billy budd" and then typing in a couple of key words from a passage. Up popped the page I wanted in the Chicago edition. I mention this to suggest that people making use of my essay who want access to a reliable text of some spot in the novella follow the same procedure. I don't think that my argument depended upon any issues related to differences between the Freeman and later scholarly texts. Freeman called the warship "Indominable." In Hayford and Sealts, it is "Bel-lipotent," and the title of the unfinished novella is **Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)**.

In a few spots my quotations from Freeman's edition looked fishy to me: "Elisha" was spelled "Elisa," for instance. There was a strange comma between the words "soft" and "glory." Not sure whether these were typographical errors in my essay or mistakes by Freeman, in such places I have silently altered the texts to follow Hayford and Sealts.

Introduction

Because Melville's literary output, when fitted to the outline of his biography, so strongly suggests "periods," there is a temptation to slice his works into comparatively unrelated sections, each the product of an essentially different creative personality. There is some justification for this. The early books seem to arise from a period of blurred potentiality. *Mardi* is an experiment. *Moby-Dick* represents a major climax. *Pierre* is a product of savage disillusionment. *Billy Budd* is written almost forty years later, and according to this scheme, all that Melville found so hard to accept in 1854 seems to be passively accepted in 1890. From a blurred potentiality, through a period of tense balance, then disillusionment, and finally, acceptance: such, greatly oversimplified, is the "grand pattern" often imposed upon the man's work.

Generally speaking, those critics who stress the continuing rather than the periodic aspects of his output do so in terms of biography or in terms of sweeping metaphysical problems which they feel pervade all his mature writing. Lawrence Thompson offers a splendid example of this sort of approach. He takes his readers on a guided tour through Melville to demonstrate his idea of *Melville's Quarrel With God* and sees Melville waging a sly war against Christianity. My notion was to approach the Melville novels as though they were the work of an author with a craftsman's memory, and to discuss continuities not of metaphysical problems, but of stylistic and technical devices. To give some semblance of organization to such a paper, I decided to project these technical continuities against *Billy Budd*.

This notion of writing a paper which could examine *Billy Budd* critically in its position as the last of the novels and yet not contain much in the way of metaphysical speculation beyond its text was appealing, but posed problems of attack. As originally designed, the thesis was to be a study of quite an imposing list of continuities in the earlier novels which, it was hoped, could be shown to continue into *Billy Budd*. The continuities which seemed most promising were Melville's used

of whiteness, his use of the microcosmic ship, and, as the one concession to philosophical matters, the techniques he used to restate repeatedly the problem of choosing between insistence on absolutes and the practical compromises apparently necessary for temporal happiness. As might be expected, when the time came to apply these continuities to *Billy Budd*, I saw that there was simply not enough room in this essay for both a thorough tracing of continuities and any sort of careful examination of the last novel. Hence it was decided to retain only the two sets of continuities upon which the examination of *Billy Budd* drew most heavily, although occasional allusions to the others, where relevant and self-explanatory, were utilized. Fortunately, the two to be discussed at length, physical disability and the ship-world technique, seemed the most promising. The object of this great running start before jumping into *Billy Budd* was to suggest that the novel is closer to the earlier group of books than it is generally considered to be, and this object was retained.

Following such an approach suggested, among other things, that the physical setting of *Billy Budd* was intended to be quite realistic. The *Indomitable*, when one reviewed some of the things Melville said out it, looked more and more like White-Jacket's *Neversink*. This in turn suggested an interesting problem: If the *Indomitable* looked and worked like a real warship, which it obviously did, how would the actions of Vere, Claggart, and Billy stand up if examined within the context of a man-of-war, regardless, for the moment, of what their actions could be construed to symbolize? For that matter, what sort of people were Vere, Claggart, and Billy?

The portraits of these characters were drawn from two viewpoints, that of the novel itself, and that of their position in relation to other characters in Melville. In the latter, of course, lurked a serious critical fallacy. If one started with a character in *Billy Budd* and then looked back through the other books for people with similar traits, it might seem that one was trying to "prove," for example, that Claggart "grew" from other earlier examples of depravity. For once, however, one could, like the defiant smoker who cried, "I like unpleasant aftertaste," declare,

"I love critical fallacies," for the purpose of the exercise in hindsight was not to "prove" that any character developed from any other, but merely to demonstrate that the central figures in *Billy Budd* are flesh and blood enough to be compared with earlier figures who *were* three-dimensional, and, in some cases, even based on real people.

Some of the results were, frankly, surprising. Captain Vere and his Master-at-Arms, Claggart, seemed considerably more complex, and, as a result, more human than I had expected. Billy himself seemed still a discouragingly two-dimensional man in a three-dimensional world. Elements in his personality didn't want to fit together, and one had to admit that he, unlike his captain or his persecutor, seemed unreal. There was, of course, always the chance that Melville intended him so; extreme unworldliness can at times be almost synonymous with unreality; saints sometimes seem unreal to unbelievers. But most surprising were the actions of Vere and Claggart. Vere, considered as a realistically drawn man in command of a realistically drawn ship, could be judged in a down-to-earth manner, and my own preconceived ideas of his role turned out to be strangely inadequate. And Claggart, depravity with rattan in hand, picked up traces of what one could only call innocence. It was, however, the innocence of an evil man who had been quite commonly duped.

Although this paper is not intended as a sweeping reinterpretation of *Billy Budd*, the conclusions reached in regard to the characters and their setting do at least suggest a change in emphasis. *Moby-Dick* is forever being discussed (and quite justly) in terms of levels of meaning; *Billy Budd*, on the other hand, is generally treated primarily on a lesser level, as a set-piece for moralists to fiddle with. Despite several dramatic flaws, *Billy Budd* can bear profitable critical discussion on the level of its factual plot and setting, a level which, as we are continually being reminded, is in *Moby-Dick* fully as important as the strata of symbolic meanings. It does not, somehow, seem proper to speculate whether or not Captain Vere is intended as a finger of God until one has established whether as a Captain

in a particular situation he has done the right thing. This paper, generally, is confined to such a factual level. However, "the arch interferer, the envious marplot of Eden still has more or less to do with every human consignment," and I could not resist including, in my last chapter, some speculations concerning possible interpretations of the book. The step beyond this, inevitably, is a reexamination of the old dispute of what Melville was like during his quiet years in New York, and whether the problems of *Mardi*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Pierre* had at last been resolved in *Billy Budd*. This is, however, well beyond the subject matter of the present thesis. My own rather sentimental ideas of what the line of reasoning here utilized would lead to are suggested in the discussion of Freeman's introduction to *Billy Budd* in the Bibliography.

The quotations from the Freeman edition of *Billy Budd* have been taken verbatim; hence the rather noticeable lapses in punctuation. Commas in particular are often missing.

In discussing stylistic continuities, the general practice will be to pick as a starting point a book in which the usage being traced is present but not apparently fully developed, and to work chronologically forward until it is obvious that Melville is manipulating the elements under examination consciously and effectively. At this point, the discussion, at least in any systematic form, may be dropped. Such usages do, of course, continue into the later novels, and will occasionally be referred to. Captain Ahab stands as a culmination of Melville's symbolic use of bodily dismemberment as clearly as Billy does for Melville's use of disability, and the *Pequod* is almost as micro-cosmic as the *Neversink* or the *Indomitable*, but a systematic examination of *Moby-Dick* in terms of either continuity, besides making the paper rather too long, would make the chapters on *Billy Budd* anticlimactic.

I

Disability, Dismemberment, and Death

As strange misgrown masses gather in the knot-holes of the noblest oaks when prostrate, so from the points which the whale's eyes had once occupied, now protruded blind bulbs, horribly pitiable to see. But pity there was none. For all his old age, and his one arm, and his blind eyes, he must die the death and be murdered, in order to light the gay bridals and other merry-makings of men, and also to illuminate the solemn churches that preach unconditional inoffensiveness by all to all. Still rolling in his blood, at last he partially disclosed a strangely discolored bunch or protuberance, the size of a bushel, low down on the flank.

"A nice spot," cried Flask; "just let me prick him there once."

"Avast!" cried Starbuck, "there's no need of that!"

But humane Starbuck was too late. At the instant of the dart an ulcerous jet shot from this cruel wound, and goaded by it into more than sufferable anguish, the whale now spouting thick blood, with swift fury darted at the craft, bespattering them and their glorying crews all over with showers of gore....

—*Moby-Dick*

Reading through Melville is a bit like humming a tune in a stall shower. Sing any song in any key and certain notes, those coinciding with the acoustical properties of your stall, keep booming in your ear. Though Melville may be discussing any subject from rope to theology, the same strains keep appearing. This chapter traces one such strain from *Typee* to *White-Jacket*.

Although it is interesting to speculate about what it was in Melville's psychological make-up that made him so acutely sensitive to physical disabilities, the main concern here is with the fact that he used them repeatedly and with considerable skill in the dramatic and symbolic structures of his writings.¹ This sensitivity is one of those permanent characteristics of the man's work which keep cropping up and which continue into *Billy Budd*. Tracking the way Melville uses it and what he means by it in the early works will perhaps establish means for evaluating its use in *Billy*.

¹ Nevertheless, the honest critic must somewhere note that there is, in *Typee* and the early novels, a kind of ambiguity in the narrator-character which affects even so specialized a critique as this. In all these novels, the narrator purports to be Melville, and the reader has no authority to give him any other name. In *Typee*, the narrator says that, because he feared the natives would have trouble pronouncing his real name, he offered them "Tom," which they corrupted into "Tommo." In *Omoo*, no name is mentioned. In *Mardi*, Melville, speaking for himself in a preface, says that he has written two true books (*Typee* and *Omoo*) which people have doubted, and will now offer a piece of fiction, which perhaps they will accept as fact. The preface is doubtless intended tongue-in-cheek, but the first fifty chapters are written as though they, too, were non-fiction. To sustain the effect, the narrator even, at times, pretends to be unsure of details, thus retaining for his narrative the appearance of an adventure recalled from memory. As in *Typee* and *Omoo*, the narrator is unnamed, and so purports to be Melville. The name "Taji" is that of a sun god he assumes to deceive the natives and is as arbitrary as "Tommo," "White-Jacket" or, for that matter, "Ishmael." Now *Typee*, *Omoo*, *Redburn*, and *White-Jacket* are, basically, biographical, and the author's thinking himself into his narrator's situations is to a large extent the author's rethinking of his own experiences. The fact, however, that when Melville turns to "complete" fiction (that is, fiction not based on experience) he retains the pose of a narrator of true adventure leads to speculation; one wonders just how autobiographical are even the first books. One must be careful not to be too dogmatic about possible psychological interpretations, for the very elements which seem most promising to the psychologist—and this element of physical disability must be very tempting—just might be elements which Melville "made up." In general, this paper will proceed as though one could assume that any such element were not a piece of conscious creativity until Melville makes it clear that he is himself fully aware of its meaningfulness. It will then be assumed that the difference (barring, of course, the stylistic development) between Melville wondering what is wrong with Tommo's leg (or is it Melville's leg?) and Melville telling his reader just precisely what Ahab's injury means is primarily one of the author's growing consciousness of what such things can represent symbolically and psychologically. The ambiguity between Melville's character and adventures and those of his narrator-hero will here be allowed to remain.

The ailing leg which plagues Tommo (the narrator) in *Typee* is the most noticeable early appearance of such sensitivity. The narrator and a friend, Toby, dissatisfied with the dull routine of life aboard a whaling ship, desert when the ship, the *Dolly*, touches at the port of Nukuheva in the Marquesas. To avoid capture, the two cross a range of mountains and head for the island's interior, hoping to reach a valley occupied by the Happers, reportedly a friendly tribe. Instead they blunder into the valley of the Typees, a much feared band of supposed cannibals. They are treated kindly, but the narrator is firmly prevented from leaving, and Toby is only allowed to go to procure medicine for Tommo's ailing leg. Toby, after an unsuccessful attempt to reach Nukuheva via Happer Valley, leaves, never to return, and disappears from Melville's life until after the novel is published. The narrator, alone with the natives he loves and yet fears, now devotes chapters to his observations and experiences with the Typees. He has an affair with a native girl (Fayaway), barely escapes being tattooed, and discovers that the Typees, good-natured though they are, are indeed cannibals. Hence his visit, while at times enjoyable to the verge of making Typee seem an earthly paradise, is also uneasy, and he longs to escape. His escape is violent, and he hates using force on these people; leaving Fayaway and the family with which he has lived is especially painful.

Through all this, his leg repeatedly bothers him. By examining some of the passages in which his ailment is described, let's try to delineate some sort of regular pattern in Melville's description of the ailment.

The leg first swells up during the flight from his ship and the outside world, and Melville is quite ambiguous as to its cause—probably, he concludes, the dampness of the previous night's sleeping place, although he half suspects that Tommo “had been bitten by some venomous reptile.”² It is the discom-

² Herman Melville, *Romances of Herman Melville*, New York, Tudor Publishing company, 1931, p. 41. References to *Typee*, *Omoo*, *Mardi*, *Redburn*, *White-Jacket*, *Moby-Dick*, or *Israel Potter* will henceforth be by the individual novel and the page number in the Tudor edition.

fort produced by this ailing leg which, by causing him to twist and roll as he tries to sleep, brings him accidentally to his first view of the Typee valley.³ Chief Mehevi first notices it just after inquiring about the French ships in Nukuheva;⁴ Toby, Tommo's buddy, is allowed to leave only after it is explained to the natives that he goes to procure medical supplies for the leg; and Toby's own injury is sustained in attempting to leave the valley.⁵ Hence each notice of the leg seems closely tied to the outside world.

One suspects that there is a link of some sort between the leg and the ambiguities of the narrator's situation. When Melville devotes pages to contrasting the purity of Typeean life with the corruptness of those islands where missionaries are at work, one senses a real nostalgia; Typee in a sense seems to him like the Mississippi of Clemens' youth, or, perhaps, like Pierre's Saddle Meadows. But while he longs to return to it, he also fears Typee. It is not quite the memory of a lost youth that Twain's Mississippi River represents. Mixed in with the basic contrast between corruption and simplicity are other elements. One is the troubling fact that he is civilized and Typee is savage; his place is in an outside world which he must return to face instead of escaping into Typee. Another is the equally troubling fear he has of the Typeeans, who, though they treat him well enough, are man-eaters. In a very real sense, the ailing leg makes just these troubling contradictions physical, for it seems to hurt whenever Melville feels most uncomfortable in a situation. A few additional illustrations should make this clear.

When Tommo realizes he is not to be rescued immediately, he stops thinking about escape and sinks "insensibly into that kind of apathy which ensues after some violent outbreak of despair." He says that his "limb suddenly healed, the swelling went down, the pain subsided, and [he] had every reason to suppose that [he] should soon completely recover from the af-

³ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 74 ff.

flication that had so long tormented [him].”⁶ Or, as he puts it a few pages later, “Returning health and peace of mind gave me a new interest to everything around me. I sought to diversify my time by as many enjoyments as lay *within reach*.”⁷ (italics mine) That is, lay within Typee valley.

The pattern remains consistent throughout the book: to try to escape is to have a bad leg; to remain and enjoy the valley is to be healthy. Often the association is so immediate that both halves of it, the injury and the thought of escape, are presented in the same passage, as here:

Although not completely recovered from my strange illness which still lingered about me, I was free from pain and able to take exercise. In short, I had every reason to anticipate a perfect recovery. Freed from apprehensions on this point, and resolved to regard the future without flinching, I flung myself anew into all the social pleasures of the valley, and sought to bury all regrets, and all remembrances of my previous existence, in the wild enjoyments it afforded.⁸

Melville is as good as his word, and, following this passage, does forget the outside world and his illness; the central portion of the book is thus devoted to the valley and the natives.

From the time of a threatened tattooing, however, Tommo feels less secure. He tells of his feeling of confinement and of his loneliness. Not till he mentions that he is again harboring thought of escape, though, does the reader learn that his leg ails him again.

Still, despite all my griefs, I did all in my power to appear composed and cheerful, well knowing that by manifesting any uneasiness, or any desire to escape, I should only frustrate my object.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

It was during the period I was in this unhappy frame of mind that the painful malady under which I had been labouring—after having almost completely subsided—began again to show itself, and with symptoms as violent as ever.⁹

These passages are quoted to make clear the seemingly casual way this association appears. It is almost as if when writing the novel and thinking back over his plans to escape from Typee, Melville were *reminded* of the bad leg. This would seem to suggest some sort of psychosomatic association. Consider this following passage. Tommo has been trying to slip away at night, and has been repeatedly foiled. There has been no mention of the leg for pages:

Even under these inauspicious circumstances I again and again renewed the attempt; but when I did so my valet always rose with me, as if determined I should not remove myself from his observation. For the present, therefore, I was obliged to abandon the attempt; but I endeavored to console myself with the idea that by this mode I might yet effect my escape.

Shortly after Marnoo's visit I was reduced to such a state, that it was with extreme difficulty I could walk....¹⁰

Here, in other words, is a case where the idea of escape seems to have recalled to Melville, as he wrote, a relapse of an ailment he had suffered sometime before. Marnoo, a tabooed native whom the Typeans allow to pass freely through their valley, had outlined a way to escape, and now, thinking back

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 160. See also p. 159. The "Karky" mentioned there is the tattoo artist himself. The casual nature of the association is especially evident in the opening sentence of the chapter, "From the time of my casual encounter with Karky the artist, my life was one of absolute wretchedness."

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

over how he tried that plan, Melville remembers that just after seeing Marnoo—that is, just after forming his escape-plan—he suffered a serious relapse.

Too often repeated to be coincidence, the pattern is either produced by a psychosomatic reaction on the part of the author or by a conscious and skillful bit of literary craftsmanship. At any rate, it is not an isolated phenomenon; Melville uses a similar technique in several places in the novel.

The first of these may well represent nothing more than a bit of literary playfulness, yet just as escape from the island is linked to injury to Toby or Tommo, so escape from the ship is linked to the death of Pedro, a one-legged cock. Pedro is the last bit of fresh meat aboard ship, and “the captain will never point the ship for the land so long as he has in anticipation a mess of fresh meat.” Melville, with mock seriousness, says he wishes Pedro no harm, yet he would like the cock’s throat “cut this very moment; for, oh! how I wish to see the living earth again!”¹¹

And, if a one-legged chicken was involved in that first “escape,” a one-eyed chieftain is involved in the last. It is Mow-Mow, who the narrator says regarded him “as a froward child,” who informs Tommo (incorrectly) that the long awaited Toby has arrived, and it is he who receives the brutal blow which wins Tommo his freedom from Typee country.¹²

These further examples of disability and injury are useful in demonstrating an incipient symbolic structure in a novel too often discussed as though it were merely a simple narrative, and are also important in demonstrating the author’s odd sensitivity to physical abnormality, on which several of the main tenets of my argument depend. They are, nonetheless, not nearly as important as the ailing leg itself. *Typee*’s linear description of an ailment which reoccurs with meaningful regularity contains no self-conscious digressions to explain the psychological significance of the ailment. It is just possible that Melville does not fully realize such significance himself. Ahab’s leg is treated

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 170 and 175.

differently than Tommo's; major portions of *Moby-Dick* are devoted to explaining the meaning of the act which cost Ahab his leg.¹³ The culmination of this discussion of disabilities and explanations will come with an examination of Billy Budd's speech defect. The culmination of the discussion of mere sensitivity to injury will be an examination of some of the other examples of physical violence or injury in *Billy Budd*.

Omoo contains no such consistent patterns as *Typee*, yet physical disability crops up once or twice in what might be significant ways. The following, referring to the still-ailing leg, seems at first glance to be intended in a humorous manner. "...I say, my lad, how's that spar of your'n? the mate says it's in a devil of a way; and last night set the steward to sharpening the handsaw; hope he won't have the carving of ye."¹⁴ It will be noted that if this is a joke, it is a ghoulish sort of a joke to crack before a man who has just undergone the experiences through which the narrator has passed. It will also be noted that Melville handles the most grisly incident in his writings, the amputation scene in *White-Jacket*, as though it were a joke, and yet reveals plainly that he feels strongly the horror of the affair.

Omoo's only other use of illness is also intended humorously. The ship's rebellious crew is being examined to determine which of its members are too unwell to stay aboard. In an odd way, sickness is, as in *Typee*, escape.

For my own part, I resolved to assume as dying an expression as possible; hoping, that on the strength

¹³ It is not at all certain that the extent to which Melville, at this early date, is consciously using physical disabilities as a symbolic and dramatic device can be determined. One can, however, be certain that their appearance is no accident. The fact that Melville keeps the association—in this book, injury and escape—together in his narrative (even when, chronologically, this involves a little back-glancing) would suggest that, even if the association is partly unconscious, *Typee* contains at least a piece or two of expressionism. Experience, instead of being reported accurately or even reported with literary exaggerations and embellishments, is rather reported after being filtered and reorganized through the partially subconscious associations of the writer.

¹⁴ Melville, *Omoo*, p. 195.

of it, I might be sent ashore, and so get rid of the ship without any further trouble.

With this intention I determined to take no part in anything that might happen until my case was decided upon. As for the doctor, he had all along pretended to be more or less unwell; and by a significant look now given me it was plain that he was becoming decidedly worse.¹⁵

One would scarcely want to base one's case on this sort of evidence, however. It is safer to conclude that *Omoo*, in so many ways less important than *Typee*, is less notable from this standpoint also, and to move on to *Mardi*, whose first fifty chapters are remarkable for a number of reasons. Here, for the first time, is Melville writing "complete" fiction (that is, fiction not primarily based upon personal experience); here, for the first time, is Melville sustaining interest over chapters in which, really, little happens but the drifting of the narrator and his hoary old companion, Jarl, on an open sea; here, for the first time fully developed, are those wonderful Melvillian digressions; and in them, again for the first time, one feels a really powerful symbolic underpinning. An abundance of imagery is floating around in the sea over which the Chamois drifts, and Melville has learned how to dip into it occasionally for the sort of refreshing digressions one thinks of as more characteristic of *Moby-Dick*.

All the Melville fixations are present. In the midst of a beautifully written catalogue of sharks, for example, is a striking usage of the sort of white-imagery found in the later novels. The white shark here takes on all the characteristics of white things in Melville: beauty, the goodness which should be inherent in all God's creatures, grace; but also an instinctively perceived maliciousness and an awesome indefiniteness which terrifies the beholder, an inscrutable something which can lead one to

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 234 and 235.

question the goodness of whatever made the shark.¹⁶ Melville drops this sort of concreteness of imagery when his narrator arrives at Mardi and the allegory proper, and it is sorely missed. How splendidly, for example, such an image as this shark could solidify the troubled thoughts of Babalanja and Taji. Suffice it to say, however, that these chapters are fruitful for any tracing of continuities in Melville, especially so when contrasted to the interesting but symbolically barren *Omoa*.

Most striking from the present point of view is chapter XXIV, another anticipation of the amputation to come in *White-Jacket* and even of the shearing off of Ahab's leg. Here Melville describes how the native Samoa amputated his own arm. As before, it's hard to tell whether Melville is joking, for although he is flippant, ("...they amputate themselves at their leisure, and hang up their tools when tired. But, though thus beholden to no one for aught connected with the practice of surgery, they never cut off their own heads, that I ever heard; a species of amputation to which, metaphorically speaking, many would-be independent sort of people in civilized lands are addicted."¹⁷) the operation is grisly enough; Samoa uses an ax, then holds the open stump over smoky fire. Moreover, the author lingers to discuss the matter further, first telling how the native hung the severed arm from the topmost-stay, and then wondering, "Now, which was Samoa?" This is an odd enough conceit for even a sentence, but Melville pursues it for two paragraphs. Before he wanders off into one of his delightful little catalogue-passages—this one dealing with heroes who have lost parts of their bodies and knights in armor—he says, "For myself, I ever regarded Samoa as but a large fragment of a man, not a man complete."¹⁸ Both the wording of the sentence itself, and the dwelling upon so odd a subject suggest the full symbolic use of dismemberment one finds in *Moby-Dick*. "A large fragment of a man" sounds very like "half a heart and half a lung," a phrase Melville uses in explaining the monomania

¹⁶ Melville, *Mardi*, pp. 399-400.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 419.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 420.

of the one-legged Ahab. If this earlier example is less fully developed, it is because Samoa is a far lesser character and Melville is a neophyte symbolist, yet the usage is effective.

It is another splendid example of the difference between these early books and *Moby-Dick*. Melville is, in *Mardi*, noticing what, from the retrospective viewpoint of one who has read *Moby-Dick*, seem the right sort of things—how Samoa, missing an arm, seems “not a. man complete,” or, picking up that other continuing strand of imagery, how of all sharks, the white shark most terrifies him. Melville is even running through all the “right” processes; the white shark comments come at the close of a catalogue of shark types that must remind one of Ishmael’s discourse on the species of whales. But he lacks two things here, first, a plot integrated around central dramatic characters, and second, the acute consciousness of what these things he notices can mean to him. Viewed from this standpoint, *Mardi* is not, to borrow F. O. Matthiessen’s phrase, the only “Sourcebook for Plenitude,” for certainly *Typee* and the books to be examined next also contain observations which have considerable potentiality. The development of Melville from a writer of adventure narratives to greatness is largely the story of his growing realization of the symbolic potentialities of actions and natural facts. Melville’s heightened symbolic consciousness will make the difference in *Moby-Dick* and *Billy*. Still, in its own context, the handling of this entire episode on board the *Parki* is a masterful job of sustaining mood and suspense; a one-armed man somehow is just the right person to meet on boarding this brigantine, and a fit mate for the erratic Annatoo.

What Melville is doing in these early narrative chapters of *Mardi* is gradually removing his hero and the reader from reality. He does this step by step and very effectively. First, we desert ship, then sail for chapters in an open boat. The weird ship *Parki* sighted; we board her. Her history and her two-piece crew are stranger yet, but still believable. When we leave the sinking *Parki*, we will soon meet the processional canoe bearing Yillah and enter into the allegory proper. Hence it’s clear Melville is

making conscious dramatic use of the amputation; Samoa fits into a hierarchy of ascending oddness—a bad ship with a bad crew, an odd companion on the desertion, the strange *Parki* and its stranger crew, and so on. That Melville kills off the companions as his hero goes along may serve to confirm his intention to separate Taji from reality; Annatoo, Jarl, and Samoa are all sacrificed to this end. Again, though, this is not *Moby-Dick*, and Melville does not *say* that Taji seems more cut off from reality. He has projected himself into his fiction to the extent that he seems able to pick the right kind of incidents to serve his dramatic and symbolic purposes, and one feels that, in these first fifty chapters, he is himself experiencing what is really his first piece of non-autobiographical fiction almost as though it were another piece of biography-expanded-into-narrative. At any rate, when, in *Redburn*, he returns to fact-based fiction, he is better at it than before, and *Redburn* has more structural and symbolic unity than the first two books despite the speed with which it was ground out.

Thus the opening pages, describing the boy Redburn's trip from his sheltered upstate New York home, work very well both as drama and as a means of creating an original image of the youth's mentality upon which his subsequent adventures can be meaningfully superimposed. Or, to pick an example from later in the novel, thus his father's guidebook to Liverpool becomes a sort of Bible of the innocent faiths of a "young inland imagination," faiths which experiences in a hard universe will repeatedly question. From the standpoint of this chapter, *Redburn* contains few examples of the sorts of physical disability so far discussed, but a good deal of another sort, built around an unusually strong fear of death, which will be useful in discussing *Billy Budd*.

A few spots in *Redburn* will suffice to illustrate this. Discussing a group of statuary in Liverpool Melville writes, "I never could look at Death without a shudder."¹⁹ He is as good as his word, and presents three sets of shudderable deaths between that sentence and the close of the novel, There is the famous

¹⁹ Melville, *Redburn*, p. 1562.

chapter "What Redburn Saw in Launcelott's-Hey,"²⁰ narrating the enormous shock upon the youthful narrator caused by his witnessing a starving mother and her dying children passing away in a world where no one seems to care. One shudders next at the dead sailor shipped as drunk by a crimp. Max, a sailor, holds a flame near the corpse's face to make sure it's dead: "'No, he's not dead,' he cried, as the yellowish flame wavered for a moment at the seaman's motionless mouth. But hardly had the words escaped, when, to the silent horror of all, two threads of greenish fire, like a forked tongue, darted out between the lips; and in a moment, the cadaverous face was crawled over by a swarm of worm-like flames."²¹ Lastly, Melville draws the death of Jackson. Throughout the book, Melville has quite skillfully linked this sailor's physical condition with his moral depravity; he was, in both ways, "but the foul lees and dregs of a man." That his death may cause a shudder Melville brings him up from the forecandle—he has been below decks, sick, for four weeks—and has him climb aloft to the very end of the topsail-yard, from which he falls to his death; his last words are blasphemous and he explodes blood over the topsail before he drops.²²

Hence each of the deaths is ghastly. The death of the woman and her children in their cellar-well in Liverpool is just more pathetic than it is disgusting; the burning cadaver is startlingly grotesque, and Jackson, "damp and death-like; the blue hollows of his eyes...like vaults full of snakes; and issuing so unexpectedly from his dark tomb in the forecandle....like a man raised from the dead," spews his life-blood across a billowing white sail.

Each one, moreover, serves a dramatic purpose, emphasizing effectively some idea Melville is stressing. The pages of discussion of the brutal, callous life of portside Liverpool find splendid embodiment in the stories of the women and the dead sailor. Police too indifferent to suffering to help those starving, or a crimp so dehumanized by his greed that he would ship

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 1578 ff.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1618.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 1649.

a dead man: thus does the young Wellingborough Redburn learn of dockside depravity. And the death of Jackson seems fitting end to his dissipated life. But besides being well written and structurally justified, these examples are especially relevant here, for when this paper comes to discuss character development, they will make specific physical comparisons possible—particularly between Jackson and Claggart.

When critics say that *Moby-Dick* represents a crystallization of elements present in earlier books, they are usually referring to the more commonly discussed symbolic and stylistic elements, his own or those he absorbed from other writers and fused into what must be regarded as his own literary language. It is one of the advantages of the present specialized approach that one can see these various strands knit closer and closer as one approaches *Moby-Dick*. Hence, in following this one rather ghoulish line, physical disability, into *White-Jacket*, it is possible to discuss passages which have often been handled before without repeating the words of other critics. It is necessary, however, to keep one's eyes directly ahead, for by the great passages in the novel the several strands of continuity are woven so closely together that it will be tempting to glance to either side and see how dramatic high points repeatedly are those points where all strands combine.

That Jack Chase had but nine fingers is a historical fact, but that Herman Melville so enlarged upon this relatively slight bit of bodily dismemberment shows that his acute sensitivity to such matters was as keen as ever. As the narrator's white jacket is the badge of his isolation, and as Jackson's consumption exemplifies his depravity, so Chase's missing finger is a kind of medal for heroism. It had been shot off when Jack, commanding a gun on board the H.M.S. *Asia*, saw action at Navarino. As always, Melville makes the affair gory. "Feel! Only a finger the lighter. I have seven more left, besides thumbs; and they did good service, too, in the torn rigging the day after the fight.... Three days I helped work with one hand, in the rigging, in the same trousers that I wore in the action; the blood had dried and stiffened; they looked like glazed red morocco."²³

²³ Melville, *White-Jacket*, p. 1299.

This repeated linking of physical with character traits seems by this time to have become a habitual way of thought with Melville. Consider, for example, this little passage.

...Priming, the nasal-voiced gunner's mate, with the hare-lip; and Cylinder, his stuttering coadjutor, with the clubbed foot. But you will always observe, that the gunner's gang of every man-of-war are invariably ill-tempered, ugly featured, and quarrelsome.²⁴

The title of the chapter in which this is found is "The Good or Bad Temper of Men-of-War's-Men, in a Great Degree, Attributable to their Particular Stations and Duties Aboard Ship"; to this one might add, "and to their Physical Appearance."

But it is not only specific characters that set off this preoccupation; almost anything can get Melville going. Discussing how cold it is off Cape Horn, he suddenly remarks, "In such weather any man could have undergone amputation with great ease, and helped take up the arteries himself."²⁵

When amputation does become necessary on board the *Neversink*, however, it is not characterized by great ease. It is, perhaps, the most grisly scene in all Melville—for although Samoa in *Mardi* removed his own arm, and Ahab lost his leg to a whale, both these amputations were past events. Samoa's is handled briefly, almost humorously, and without too much detail. Ahab's we learn of only by references. The amputation in *White-Jacket*, however, is carefully prepared for, quite deliberately staged, and mercilessly delineated.

The portrait of the ship's surgeon is masterful, and, significantly, it uses bodily dismemberment to achieve its effect. Cadwallader Cuticle, M.D., has many of the traits of a Hawthorne character.²⁶ Like a Hollingsworth, or like Aymler, his devotion to his one great interest is so all-embracing that he

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1136.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1170.

²⁶ The incident here discussed is contained in chapters LXI-LXIII, pp. 1256-1267.

loses his sense of human sympathy; to do so is to become cut off from humanity. Like Hollingsworth and like Ahab, he is a monomaniac. Melville tells us this in two ways—an out-and-out statement of the fact, and a description of his physical aspects.

Surrounded by moans and shrieks, by features distorted with anguish inflicted by himself, he yet maintained a countenance almost supernaturally calm; and unless the intense interest of the operation flushed his wan face with a momentary tinge of professional enthusiasm, he toiled away, untouched by the keenest misery coming under a fleet-surgeon's eye. Indeed, long habituation to the dissecting-room and the amputation-table had made him seemingly impervious to the ordinary emotions of humanity. Yet you could not say that Cuticle was essentially a cruel-hearted man. His apparent heartlessness must have been of a purely scientific origin. It is not to be imagined even that cuticle would have harmed a fly, unless he could procure a microscope powerful enough to assist him in experimenting on the minute vitals of the creature. [1258]

Up to the last sentence, the one beginning "It is not to be imagined," the points are Hawthornian; the words are those of a novelist with insight into the moral structure of his characters. The words of the last sentence do not sound like Hawthorne; they are savagely satirical and quite in the mood of the second way Melville tells what manner of man was Cadwallader Cuticle. This second way is by physical description.

Small and withered, shallow chested, stoop shouldered, with "skeleton legs," seemingly lifeless but for the brightness of his one eye, Cuticle is "a curious patch-work of life and death, with a wig, one glass eye, and a set of false teeth." Cuticle is another of those Melville characters who lives on as half-a-man, his single eye indicative of his singleness of purpose, his monomaniac devotion to his science.

Melville skillfully maintains the mood. The surgeon's surroundings are carefully described. His heartless fascination for morbid anatomy has led him to collect casts of deformed people; one of these of an elderly woman with a "hideous, crumpled horn" growing out of her forehead. Again Melville's curious sensitivity to such things becomes apparent. "The horn seemed the mark of a curse for some mysterious sin. . . . some sin growing out of the heartless necessities of the predestination of things; some sin under which the sinner sank in sinless woe." As always, Cuticle regards it only as a scientific example.

The imagery of the doctor's room is the imagery of Hell. Cuticle seems "a preternatural being," and once, due to his carelessness with Lucifer matches, his room becomes enveloped "in a thick, bluish vapor, and stifling with odours of brimstone." It was noted before that Melville mixes humor in with his handling of the surgeon; the humor, however, is of a singularly grisly sort. For example, a joke played on Cuticle consists of giving him a tin of bluish-white pudding, tagged as "an uncommonly fine specimen of cancer." Cuticle is fooled, and is quite excited about his new acquisition. The climax of the practical joke occurs when a lieutenant, in on the gag, asks for a bite of it to eat. Cuticle says he would as well let him have "one of my limbs" (again, Melville almost instinctively uses amputation imagery!).

The sardonic strain of humor continues as we approach the operation itself. A man-of-war's man has been shot, and, since the *Neversink* is in port at Rio de Janeiro near other American ships, Cuticle, as senior surgeon of the fleet, invites the other American ship-surgeons aboard for consultation. Cuticle would like them all to approve of his going ahead with the amputation; all of them feel it an unwise act, and Melville depicts them hedging about telling him so. While making light of their cowardice, he also shows again Cuticle's monomania, for this is an operation carried out less for medical need than for Cuticle's scientific curiosity, and he will carry it out even if it is clearly medically incorrect to do so. All of this is especially interesting in the light of another instance in which the more rational

opinions of subordinates are brushed aside by a naval officer whose mind is made up before even calling a consultation—the instance, of course, being Vere's summoning a drumhead court to try Billy Budd.

The operation is to take place not in the surgeon's quarters or the sick bay, but on the half-deck, and so Melville again sets the scene. The death-board, used in sea funeral services, is to serve as operating table. Cuticle, who will use a human skeleton to illustrate his operation as he goes, has the skeleton hung at the foot of the amputation-table—in continuous sight of the poor patient. As if that were not horrible enough to look at, Cuticle removes wig, teeth, and false eye, and stands above the wounded sailor “a meager death's head” himself.

Dr. Cuticle further tortures the patient by first telling him of the crudities of ancient amputations (“...such was the general ignorance of our noble science, that, in order to prevent the excessive effusion of blood, it was deemed indispensable to operate with a red-hot knife”—making a professional movement toward the thigh—“and pour scalding oil upon the parts...”), upon which the sailor faints. When he recovers, Cuticle is commenting on how “after all, the patient may die under my hands.” The patient faints again.

The perhaps excessive space here devoted to the single incident is justified by the fact that the scene is a kind of focal point for all the author's sensitivity to physical disability. An impressive emotional build-up has been achieved in numerous ways. First, Melville pours out a more and more bitter rain of sarcasm and merciless irony. The characters of the other ship doctors have been quickly sketched, and Cuticle and they carry on a gallant, gentlemanly repartee which mocks the seriousness of the operation; Cuticle even courteously invites first an assistant surgeon and then a senior surgeon to perform parts of the task. Second, the imagery becomes increasingly vivid, till, by the operation chapter, references to Hell and death occur in almost every paragraph. Third, the pace and tone of Melville's style build to a dramatic climax. When Melville tells of the original wound, he does so in a detached, accurate, almost

pedantic manner, pausing often to comment on various aspects of the injury. This is about as high as Melville lets excitement raise: "The extreme misery and general prostration of the man, caused by the great effusion of blood—though, strange to say, at first he said he felt no pain from the wound itself—induced the surgeon, very reluctantly, to forgo an immediate search for the ball, to extract it, as that would have involved the dilating of the wound by the knife; an operation which, at that juncture, would have been almost certainly attended with fatal results." "General prostration," "great effusion," "induced," "reluctantly," "forgo," "dilating," "juncture," "attended": these seem all rather abstract words; their presence as well as the pause at "strange to say" serve to slow down the pace and minimize the emotional content of the passage. But mood and tension increase in the next few pages. Even the digressions become more pointed; the conversations between Cuticle and the other surgeons, for example, come to be freighted with suppressed tension.

This stylistic crescendo reaches its peak during the actual cutting. No more author's comments now: Melville's eye is quick and accurate, seeing everything, hearing everything:

"The sponges, Steward," said Cuticle, for the last time taking out his teeth, and drawing up his shirt sleeve still further. Then, taking the patient by the wrist, "Stand by, now, you mess-mates; keep hold of his arms; pin him down. Steward, put your hand on the artery; I shall commence as soon as his pulse begins to—*now, now!*" letting fall the wrist, feeling the thigh carefully and bowing over it an instant, he drew the fatal knife unerringly across the flesh. As it first touched the part, the row of surgeons simultaneously dropped their eyes to the watches in their hands, while the patient lay, with eyes horribly distended, in a kind of waking trance. Not a breath was heard; but as the quivering flesh parted in a long, lingering gash, a spring of blood

welled up between the living walls of the wound, and two thick streams, in opposite directions, coursed down the thigh. The sponges were instantly dipped in the purple pool; every face present was pinched to a point with suspense; the limb writhed; the man shrieked; his mess-mates pinioned him; while round and round the leg went the unpitying cut. [1264-1265]

II

Half a Man

He looked like a man cut away from the stake, when the fire has overrunningly wasted all the limbs without consuming them....

—*Moby-Dick*

Emerging from the tracing of Melville's curious sensitivity has been a series of character types whose personalities have been paralleled by their physical conditions. Such characters could be helpful in finding continuing strands running into *Billy Budd*. To whatever extent *Billy* contains representatives of Melville "types," they could help delineate the geneology of those types.

From *Omoo* on, one meets characters who, in one or many ways, resemble Claggart. Claggart, however, is a very special kind of villain. The brief examination of *Omoo*, which contains no really outstanding characters, will be useful in drawing contrasts. One can better gauge the stature of Claggart by first measuring smaller Melville villains. Before seeing what he is, it would be well to define what he is not. Captain Guy of the *Little Jule* looks rather like him—"pale and slender, more like a sickly countinghouse clerk than a bluff sea-captain,"²⁷ and is an early sample of a sort of small, meaninglessly cruel type. There is, however, nothing in him of the satanical. Although Melville says that despite Guy's weakness and incompetence, he does have rather more to do with the running of the ship than the crew thinks, the impression one retains is of pettiness. The man lacks real judgement, and makes no concerted attempt to understand even his own situation. His actions when the ship puts into an island port are downright foolish—he leaves a

²⁷ Melville, *Omoo*, p. 194.

mutinous crew without even a mate in command. Granted, he is sick at the time. But even on recovering he is irresponsible; there is no attempt on either his part or on the part of his crony, the Consul, to deal justly—or even practically—with the crew. Beside the physical similarity, he has little in common with the methodical Claggart except perhaps when his pettiness turns to cruelty. When the *Julia* touches at the little island of La Dominca, Melville describes Guy's cowardly treatment of a party of armed but puzzled natives who come out to meet the captain's boat.

One of them stepped forward and made answer, seemingly again urging the strangers not to be diffident, but beach their boat. The captain declined, tossing his arms about in another pantomime. In the end he said something which made them shake their spears; where upon he fired a pistol among them, which set the whole party running; while one poor little fellow, dropping his spear and clapping his hand behind him limped away in a manner which almost made me itch to get a shot at his assailant.²⁸

Evil as one thinks of Claggart as being, one can hardly imagine his doing such a thing; it is far beneath him. Claggart is too satanical—in a Miltonic sense of the word. He is a greater evil man than this; senseless murder is beneath him.

Jermin, Guy's mate, is nothing like Vere's sergeant-at-arms; he looks nothing like him, being short and rugged, acts nothing like him, having none of Claggart's polish, and, though an exceedingly competent mate, is boisterous and habitually drunk; one cannot picture Claggart either boisterous or drunk. In his crew, however is one striking figure, the ship's carpenter, who, if not so grand a figure as Claggart, is a start along the way. Of Chips' looks, Melville says:

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

There was no absolute deformity about the man; he was symmetrically ugly. But ill favored as he was in person, Beauty (as the crew ironically called him) was none the less ugly in temper; but no one could blame him; his countenance had soured his heart.²⁹

While this is a clear illustration of that linking of physical with the psychological previously often noticed, it is not a very subtle job. Ugly villains and handsome heroes are the commonest clichés of bad (or even good) sentimental novelists, and when Melville is at his very best in this fairly superficial level, he can rival Dickens in the sharp portrayal of minor characters—witness his sketches of dockside London in *Redburn*, or the eccentric ship-board characters in *White-Jacket*. In this sense, Chips is a start toward such quick caricatures. Certainly Chips' portrayal has none of the subtlety and ambiguity of Claggart's, and none of the depth of Ahab's.

Chip's drinking partner, for just one short passage in Chapter XV, stumbles drunkenly across another strand in what will eventually be Claggart's character. Bungs has a notion that Lord Nelson, besides missing an arm and one eye, had also lost a leg. Bungs is tipsy, and, pretending to be Nelson, he says to his Danish chum, "Look at you: one man—hang me, half a man—with one leg, one arm, one eye—hang me, with only a piece of a carcass, flogged your whole shabby nation."³⁰ The notion of "half a man" is here intended in only a physical sense, but odd as the conceit is, it seems to stick in Melville's mind and gradually picks up strong psychological implications. All Melville's great monomaniacs are half-men. Claggart is the last and subtlest of the lot.

The next half-a-man, chronologically, is Samoa; it has already been demonstrated how Melville half-humorously says Taji "regarded one-armed Samoa as but a large fragment of a man." Later in *Mardi*, Melville elaborates a bit. Chapter XXX, "Hints for a Full Length of Samoa," gives a physical description of Samoa, in which occurs this passage:

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

...his style of tattooing...seemed rather incomplete; his marks embracing but a vertical half of his person, from crown to sole; the other side being free from the slightest strain. Thus clapped together, as it were, he looked like a union of the unmatched moieties of two distinct beings; and your fancy was lost in conjecturing where roamed the absent ones. When he turned round upon you suddenly, you thought you saw someone else, not him who you had been regarding before.³¹

The usage, then, has by now been developed to the point where it is meaningful sociologically; in Samoa's case, the half-a-man probably refers less to a monomania than to the odd duality of the half-civilized savage.³² Incidentally, the Nelson analogy crops up here again; the reader is told of Samoa's missing arm, "...you would have thought he had been born without it, so Lord Nelson-like and cavalierly did he sport the honorable stampt." As noticed before, Samoa's strangeness is structurally justified in *Mardi*; being half-a-man and half-civilized, he is also, compared to what has come before in the narrative opening chapters, only half-real, and serves to bring the narrative closer to the complete fantasy of the Mardian archipelago.

It may seem odd in tracing characters who seem to lead to Claggart to discuss men so unlike him. Surely, for example, Samos as a personality has little enough in common with Claggart. Were there a picturesque savage prominent among the crew of the *Indomitable*, it would be justifiable to trace his lineage through Samoa—one might start with Kory-Kory and some of the other cannibals of Typee valley, continue the strand through *Mardi* and on into *Moby-Dick*, for Kory-Kory, Mehevi,

³¹ Melville, *Mardi*, p. 431.

³² Samoa's actions seem to bear this out; he is an odd mixture of practical sailor and "primitive" islander, one moment making a seamanlike decision, the next displaying foolish superstitions. The contrast between his savage heroism in the fight which wins him his craft and his hen-pecked timidity before his mate, Annatoo, is especially marked. One is reminded of Ishmael's friend Queequeg, who is civilized enough to wear shoes, but who retires under a bed to put them on.

Mow-Mow, Samoa and others all have a great deal in common with Queequeg, the good-hearted horror to whom Ishmael becomes so attached. But while Samoa as a native character leads to Queequeg, Samoa as a technical device leads straight to Ahab in whom physical condition symbolizes not duality, but monomania. And Ahab, as will presently be shown, is one of a very few characters who have a great deal in common with Claggart.

Chronologically, however, the first of these to be fully developed is the sailor Jackson in *Redburn*. Jackson, like Bland in *White-Jacket*, is quite near to a real-life predecessor of John Claggart. Although there is no way to tell just to what extent Jackson, as he appears in *Redburn*, is based on a sailor Melville knew, it is probably safe to assume that he is as much a real sailor as Wellingborough Redburn is Melville, which is to say, quite a bit.

Jackson doesn't look like Claggart, but his looks serve about the same purpose as Claggart's.

Did you ever see a man, with his hair shaved off [Claggart has black hair], and just recovered from the yellow fever?....He was as yellow as gamboge [gamboge, a resin, is brownish-yellow, Claggart's complexion is whitish-yellow], had no more whisker on his cheek, than I have on my elbow. His hair had fallen out, and left him very bald, except at the nape of his neck, and just behind the ears, where it was stuck over with short little tufts, and looked like a worn-out shoe-brush. His nose had broken down in the middle, and he squinted with one eye, and did not look very straight out of the other. [Claggart has clean features.] He dressed a good deal like a Bowery boy [Claggart as Master-at-Arms, is neater and less picturesque in dress].³³

³³ Melville, *Redburn*, p. 1502. The discussion of Jackson and quotations are from Chapter XII, pp. 1502-1506.

Carrying the comparison a bit further: while Jackson is uneducated and Claggart seems cultivated, both are cunning, and Jackson, like Claggart, “understood human nature to a kink.” Claggart’s antecedents are vague; Jackson is a New Yorker; only his age is ambiguous—”He might have been thirty, or perhaps fifty years.” Jackson’s background is more colorful, particularly since he talks more; Melville has him telling of “piracies, plagues, and poisonings.” Because he is a sailor on a merchant ship, Jackson’s relation to the men is superficially different from Claggart’s. He is a bully, and the crew kow-tows to him, afraid even to laugh at his stories until sure he means them as jokes. He has at times “a comical way with him,” though his humor usually seems used to scorn his mates. Once, after telling a good story with a straight face, he mocks the crew members for their fear to laugh; “he flouted, and jeered at them, and laughed them all to scorn; and broke out in such a rage, that his lips began to glue together at the corners with a fine white foam.” Thus, though he does have more real contact with the men, it’s clear he, like Claggart, has drawn into himself: “there were no bounds for his contempt; and indeed, all the time he seemed to have even more contempt than hatred, for everybody and every thing.”

Just how Jackson’s mind works is made clear in a small incident in Chapter XXIII. A little boy, whose English immigrant father has died, has stowed away on board the *Highlander*. Jackson “at first befriended this boy; but the boy always shrank from him; till, at last, stung by his conduct Jackson spoke to him no more; and seemed to hate him, harmless as he was, along with all the rest of the world.”³⁴ One can feel Claggart here; the scene is prescient of Melville’s comment that Claggart would have loved the beauty and goodness of a Billy Budd had he been able. The nearest to a Billy character here, of course, is Redburn himself, and his reactions also remind one of the Claggart-Jackson relationship. Like the narrator in *Billy*, Redburn really pities Jackson as much as he hates him. As is Claggart, Jackson is surrounded by devil-imagery, but

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1536.

as with Claggart, a passage relating the horror of the man can immediately precede one which cuts into his loneliness. For example:

Though he never attended churches, and knew nothing about Christianity....and though he could not read a word, yet he was spontaneously an atheist and an infidel, and during the long night watches, would enter into arguments, to prove that there was nothing to be believed....He was a horrid desperado and like a wild Indian, whom he resembled in his tawny skin and high cheekbones, he seemed to run amuck at heaven and earth. He was a Cain afloat; branded on his yellow brow with some inscrutable curse; and going about corrupting every heart that beat near him.

And then:

But there seemed even more woe than wickedness about the man; and his wickedness seemed to spring from his woe; and for all his hideousness, there was that in his eye at times that was ineffably pitiable and touching, and though there were moments when I almost hated this Jackson, yet I have pitied no man as I have pitied him.³⁵

This sort of insight gives Jackson a depth he really needs to stand as a major character, and Melville works on him about as much as he works on anything in the book. He goes to considerable trouble, for instance, to give symbolic meaning to Jackson's eye—"one glance of his squinting eye, was as good as a knock-down, for it was the most deep, subtle, infernal looking eye, that I ever saw lodged in a human head." "[I]t must have belonged to a wolf or a starved tiger"...."I would defy any occultist to turn out a glass eye, half so cold, and snaky,

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 1531-1532.

and deadly. It was a horrible thing, and I would give much to forget that I have ever seen it; for it haunts me to this day.”³⁶ Or, a few pages later, after relating the horror of having the eye fixed upon himself, Redburn describes it in a moment of temptation: “I watched Jackson’s eye and saw it snapping, and a sort of going in and out, very quick, as if it were something like a forked tongue, and somehow I felt as if he were longing to kill the man (a sailor whose mouth he is examining with a knife).”³⁷ We might compare this with a passage in *Billy Budd* to demonstrate how even the technical devices have remained constant:

...upon any abrupt unforeseen encounter [with Billy, against whom Claggart is now plotting] a red light would flash forth from his eye like a spark from an anvil in a dusk smithy. That quick fierce light was a strange one, darted from orbs which in repose were of a color approaching a deeper violet, the softest of shades.³⁸

If one keeps in mind the fact that in the *Redburn* passage Melville is intentionally using the rather awkward and excited language of a young boy (as evidenced by the continual stringing together of sentences with “and,” or by language like “and a sort of going in and out, very quick”), the two excerpts seem almost identical. Here, then, is another case of a technique based on physical factors which remains constant in Melville’s style. To summarize: while more talkative, more in living contact with the crew, more picturesque, and rather different looking than Claggart, Jackson is the same type of character in that he is, as Redburn tells us, “the foul lees and drags of a man,” one of the type of Melville characters who seem completely depraved, but who have enough stature as human beings so that their depravity

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1503.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1505.

³⁸ F. Barron Freeman, *Melville's Billy Budd*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1948, p. 208.

seems unjustly imposed. "He seemed to be full of hatred and gall against every thing and every body in the world; as if all the world was one person, and had done him some dreadful harm, that was rankling and festering in his heart."³⁹

This passage is perhaps the key to the whole tracing of Claggart. What has soured Jackson and Claggart is what has made a monomaniac of Ahab. The idea of the world embodied in a single figure, whose "dreadful harm" has turned a man inward is the concept behind *Moby-Dick*. The "dreadful harm" in *Moby-Dick* is the specific symbolic shearing off of a leg; here it goes unnamed. In two different personalities it has produced two different types of monomania, the driving, all-encompassing quest of Ahab, or the more passive self-consuming depravity of Jackson. Or perhaps it's just that Jackson never gets the grandiose opportunity that Ahab does—for Ahab has the whale's act as a core around which to solidify his doubt and hatred, and a command—the *Pequod*—with which to seek out truth. Jackson has much of the potential but cannot be as coherent. Listen again to young Redburn: "Sometimes I thought he was really crazy; and often felt so frightened at him, that I thought of going to the captain about it, and telling him Jackson ought to be confined, lest he should do some terrible thing at last."⁴⁰ Both men have, in words of another Melville novel, lost confidence, and both are great doubters. But Jackson loudly argues atheism to reassure himself, while Ahab, whose mania has congealed, aims himself at a single object which, to him, represents all "that was rankling and festering in his heart." The pointless self-destructive malice of a Jackson and the well-directed mania of an Ahab are two poles, and Claggart lies somewhere between. Jackson has no symbol toward which to aim himself, while Ahab has to the point where the symbol itself has become a monomaniac fixation. But the white image against which Claggart flings himself does not lend itself to the titanic rationalizations of *Moby-Dick*. It is merely a handsome sailor, whose apparent goodness taunts the man who has lost

³⁹ Melville, *Redburn*, p. 1506.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

belief, confidence, in good. This is exactly what happens to Jackson when he comes in contact with either the little boy, or with Redburn himself (for Redburn is, by his own admission, handsome, and Jackson's special animosity toward him is doubtless based on his youth and innocence). But neither the boy nor Redburn is substantial enough to create any really large central image in Jackson's mind. Billy, while major enough to set Claggart a-plotting, has not after all ripped off the man's leg, and so Claggart stands intermediate between Jackson and Ahab.

This ranking is not arbitrary; it is Melville's own. Ahab is a captain, with power to carry out the quest his symbol has motivated. Jackson is a seaman, with only a bully's power. Claggart stands between; as a master-at-arms he wields considerable power, and can put his cat's-paws to work on Billy. Yet despite the difference in rank and stature one should not minimize the similarity between Ahab and Claggart. They represent in a very large sense the same psychological phenomenon. Of Claggart's sort of depravity Melville says,

...it is without vices or small sins. There is no phenomenal pride in it that excludes them [those so depraved] from anything mercenary or avaricious. In short the depravity here meant partakes nothing of the sordid or sensual. It is serious, but free from acerbity. Though no flatterer of mankind it never speaks ill of it.

But the thing which in eminent instances signalizes so exceptional a nature is this: though the man's even temper and discrete bearing would seem to intimate a mind peculiarly subject to the law of reason, not the less in his heart he would seem to riot in complete exception from that law having apparently little to do with reason further than to employ it as an ambidexter implement for effecting the irrational. That is to say: toward the

accomplishment of an aim which in wantonness of malignity would seem to partake of the insane, he will direct a cool judgment sagacious and sound.

These men are true madmen, and of the most dangerous sort, for their lunacy is not continuous but occasional, evoked by some special object....⁴¹

Of Ahab's, he first describes how the "special object," the whale, has "evoked" his madness, and then tells how Ahab, too, appeared sane and reliable, so much so that prudent Nantucket considered him, if anything, a better captain for his injury. Exactly paralleling the passage above from *Billy Budd*, "toward the accomplishment of the aim," is this from Chapter XLI of *Moby-Dick*: "Now, in his heart, Ahab had some glimpse of this, namely: all my means are sane, my motive and my object mad."⁴²

Having set up a pattern for these Claggart-figures, there should be no difficulty in classifying Bland, the master-at-arms of the *Neversink*. Of all Melville characters, he is probably the closest to Claggart himself. Melville's description of him is perhaps the best portrait in *White-Jacket*; to do real justice to it would involve quoting it all and commenting on it. For the present purpose, however, a simple comparison with Claggart should suffice.

Like Claggart, Bland is gentlemanly; he has nothing of the grossness of Jackson; he is polished and "socially quite irresistible."⁴³ Like Claggart, Bland is spoken of as being irretrievably depraved; "he was an organic and irreclaimable scoundrel, who did wicked deeds as cattle browse the herbage, because wicked deeds seemed the legitimate operation of his whole infernal organization."⁴⁴ Like Claggart, he is more to be pitied than hated; White-Jacket says he pities "the continued

⁴¹ Freeman, *Melville's Billy Budd*, pp. 186-187.

⁴² Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 871.

⁴³ Melville, *White-Jacket*, p. 1220.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1221.

gnawing, which under all his deftly-donned disguises, I saw lying at the bottom of his soul."⁴⁵ And Melville uses the same sort of technical devices to portray him. Bland is surrounded by devil-imagery, and Bland's eye, like Jackson's and Claggart's, shines evilly. This time the phrase used is, "his snaky, black eye... at times shone like a dark-lantern in a jeweler-shop at midnight."⁴⁶

Moreover, his history is so much like Claggart's that he probably can be regarded as an actual model for the latter, particularly if, as is elsewhere noted, the *Neversink* and the *Indomitable* are, as their names imply, about the same ship. Claggart's past is vague, but it's generally believed that he went to sea a common sailor to escape the social ostracism resulting from his part in some unnamed but scandalous affair. Bland's scandal occurs on board ship, when his liquor-smuggling activities are uncovered, and he, like Claggart, then starts again as a common sailor. It's a bit hard to imagine Claggart ever smuggling liquor, but then *Billy Budd* never deals with the sort of ship-board anecdotes which form the bulk of *White-Jacket*, and perhaps if Melville showed more of Claggart one would think differently. Yet here doubtless is one real difference between the two: Claggart is a more heroic villain. Bland does evil because it is his routine way of life. Caught smuggling liquor to men whom he himself punishes for drunkenness, he is not crushed, but blandly goes on, charming and hypocritical as ever, to become a sort of favorite among the very men who hate him most. Claggart's evil is for bigger stakes than money, and he takes his own evil more seriously. One can hardly picture Claggart exposed, say, for "framing" Billy, and jovially becoming the mess-mate of some of the most popular sailors on board ship; he's too proud.

One can trace this difference in the devil-imagery itself. Of Bland, Melville says, "who can forever resist the very devil himself, when he comes in the guise of a gentleman, free, fine,

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1220.

and frank?"⁴⁷ Claggart, in contrast, is portrayed as a heroic and satanical figure in more of a tragic sense. In stature, they stand about as Benet's Devil does compared to Milton's Satan.

In terms of opportunity for evil, then, Claggart and Bland, as masters-at-arms, are in approximately equal positions. Bland lacks the heroic elements of a Claggart; Jackson lacked temporal power. Ahab has both, and in far greater amounts than Claggart will ever have.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1221.

III

Claggart

Vice...is a creature of such heejus mien...that the more ye see it th' better ye like it.

—Mr. Dooley, *The Crusade Against Vice*

The Devil has martyrs among men.

—Dutch proverb

Everything that deceives may be said to enchant.

—Plato, *the Republic*

It is not the purpose of this portion of the paper to demonstrate that Claggart—or, for that matter, any of the characters in *Billy Budd*—“grows” out of the types traced herein. Although there is some reason to believe that Claggart is really related to men Melville knew and about whom he had written, the central reason for discussing characters in Melville who seem like Claggart in one way or another is to give Claggart as much humanity, as much personal dimension, as possible. Stated another way, the intention is to show not that Claggart is an amalgam of previous types, but that (1) characters like him do exist before in Melville, (2) that when these characters appear, they are not flat allegorical figures, but rather, even in the cases of the most depraved, exceedingly human and often worthy of pity, and (3) that Melville uses many of the same techniques to portray Claggart that he uses on the earlier characters. This is what justified the digression to compare them in stature, and is the same objective as will be sought in this chapter, in which will be attempted a full-length portrait of Claggart. One cannot blankly decide that Claggart is totally depraved and let matters rest; Melville has made matters more ambiguous; one must listen to what Melville has to say about the man.

What strikes one first is that Claggart's personality is hard to pin down. He is not a clean-cut example of any narrow type. There is a palpable ambiguity about the man, and one method of showing it is through the author's use of his appearance. The physical description of Claggart in Chapter VIII is strikingly to the point. Toward the end of the first paragraph of this description, after delineating his hand, clean features, heavy chin, intelligent brow and black hair, Melville describes an odd complexion, likened to the whitish-yellow of old marble. The first sentence of the next paragraph continues on this complexion, suggesting some abnormality in his "constitution and blood," but then the paragraph, a fairly long one, turns to a description of his singularly vague history. For the present purposes, what is most important is the way Melville has run together the physical with the historical. This is no accident; he is equating the physical ambiguity of appearance with the medley of ambiguous facts and rumors concerning Claggart's antecedents. Claggart's face is of the stock Melvillian color for ambiguity, off-color white.

After four pages of miscellaneous discussion, Melville offers, as though in summary, a masterful let-down: "About as much was really known to the *Indomitable's* tars of the Master-at-arms' career before entering the service as an astronomer knows about a comet's travels prior to its first observable appearance in the sky." Then why all the pages of discussion? Probably, to heighten the sense of ambiguity surrounding Claggart.

A few signs of this ambiguity should be discussed. Mixed in with Claggart's evil is a satanic envy of the good. Of what Billy's unconscious grace and handsomeness meant to Claggart, Melville says,

He saw the charm of it,...and fain would have shared it, but he despaired of it.

With no power to annul the elemental evil in him, though readily enough could hide it; appre-

hending the good, but powerless to be it; a nature like Claggart's surcharged with energy as such natures almost invariably are, what recourse is left to it but to recoil upon itself and like the scorpion for which the creator alone is responsible, act out to the end the part allotted it.⁴⁸

The tone of that paragraph is strange; one almost feels that all this is not Claggart's fault. "The reactionary bite of that serpent"⁴⁹ has ruined a man who "fane would have shared" Billy's attractive qualities. One should also note that Melville here carefully limits Claggart's envy to Billy's appearance; Melville is explicit regarding "what it was that had first moved him [Claggart] against Billy, namely, his significant personal beauty."⁵⁰

This point is quite important, for Claggart, villain that he is, has a peculiar conscience, and his seeming plot against Billy really goes step-by-step. Claggart never proceeds with the next step until some fairly real-seeming suspicions are confirmed by the previous. The incident in which Billy accidentally spills some soup in Claggart's path is thus very encouraging to Claggart. To illustrate: Squeak, a spy of Claggart's, has been making up stories about Billy to please his master, "by perverting to his chief certain innocent frolics of the good-natured foretopman, besides inventing for his mouth sundry contumelious epithets he claimed to have overheard him let fall. *The Master-at-arms never suspected the veracity of these reports, more especially as to the epithets.*"⁵¹ [italics mine] Envyng Billy's looks, Claggart, not knowing these reports to be wrong, can honestly feel Billy bears him malice! He has really believed that the soup Billy spilled was a deliberate insult, a "sly escape of a spontaneous feeling on Billy's part more or less answering to the antipathy on his own," and it is Melville who explicitly says so. The

⁴⁸ Freeman, *Melville's Billy Budd*, p. 192.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 190-191.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

term Melville uses to express Claggart's intent is "retributive righteousness." His first step has succeeded: as far as he knows, he has tested Billy and found that Billy hates him.

The Pharisee is the Guy Fawkes prowling in the hid chambers underlying some natures like Claggart's. And they can really form no conception of an unreciprocated malice. Probably the Master-at-arms' clandestine persecution of Billy was started to try the temper of the man; but it had not developed any quality in him that enmity could make official use of or even pervert into even plausible self-justification [so, up to now, Claggart had done nothing else; he is proceeding step by step]; so that the occurrence at the mess, [the spilled soup] petty if it were, was a welcome one to that peculiar conscience assigned to be the private mentor of Claggart; and, for the rest, not improbably it put him upon new experiments."⁵²

A close reading of the pages now under discussion does, however, bring out an apparent contradiction. Melville says that through Billy's appearance Claggart *can* comprehend his [Billy's] innocence ["One person except the Master-at-arms was perhaps the only man in the ship intellectually capable of adequately appreciating the moral phenomenon presented in Billy Budd..."⁵³], and yet he also says that Claggart believes Billy calls him names and spilled the soup on purpose. It is just possible that we have stumbled upon a flaw in Melville's plot here. For the purposes of a chapter designed to show that Claggart is a complex character, of course, all this is very fine indeed! Claggart seems not only ambiguous, but downright contradictory.

It is clear that Claggart is proceeding in a methodical way. Certainly his spies are working overtime. The next major inci-

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 195-196.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

dent is Billy's meeting with the mysterious young afterguardsman, whom the Dansker identifies for us as a cat's-paw for Claggart.⁵⁴ Next comes the unsuccessful chase of a French frigate, and then Claggart goes to Vere to report Billy's purported mutinous intentions. If one projects the pattern established concerning Claggart's step-by-step method, it will seem that something is missing. If the afterguardsman is a spy, what did he report to Claggart? There is, unfortunately, no sure way of knowing. But Melville mentions a few minor things that happen to Billy. For one thing, the little scrapes Billy had been getting into because someone had been tampering with his "hammock on his clothes-bag, or what not" cease to occur.⁵⁵ For another, Billy, curious to see the slinking afterguardsman in the light, investigates and can't be sure what sort of fellow he is. As any rate, the person now greets Billy affably, and Billy becomes more confused.⁵⁶

It is probably safe to assume that the cat's-paw reported to his master. The question is, what did he report? If he behaved as Squeak behaved, knowing Claggart to be "down on" Billy, and "having naturally enough concluded that his master could have no love for the sailor, [he would have] made it his business, faithful understrapper that he was, to ferment the ill blood" by lying to Claggart. Claggart, again, is proceeding step by step, and will not, because of the conscience Melville insists he has, go on until each of his experiments succeeds. That he called off his underdogs in the matter of the meddling he was having them do with Billy's hammock and clothes-bag would seem to show he had received information of something bigger. No point bothering to mess up the man's hammock when he can be accused of mutiny! That the information was a lie, we and the afterguardsman know full well, but Claggart was gullible before—even though Melville says Claggart understands Billy's innocent nature, he also points out that Claggart believed that

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁵⁵ Freeman, *Melville's Billy Budd*, p. 206.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 202. See also *Billy Budd*, p. 209 for evidence of Claggart's informers at work.

Billy called him names—and, since he wants to believe Billy guilty, he could be gullible again.

This throws a rather different light on the scene in which the Master-at-arms appears, cap in hand, before his captain! Monomaniac Claggart, duped by his underlings and with all his “experiments” successful, can feel he is loyally doing his duty in reporting Billy.

There is other evidence of this kind of “innocence” for Claggart. His interview with Captain Vere is unusual in that Claggart, ordinarily an extraordinarily tactful person (—indeed, Melville repeatedly says that Claggart’s sort of mania produces acts carried out with subtlety and skill—) is not tactful. He blunders badly by referring to a recent mutiny:

“God forbid, your honor, that the *Indomitable*’s
should be the experience of the ——.”

“Never mind that!” [says Vere]⁵⁷

and generally manages to make his story sound pretty suspicious. He is a cleverer man than that, and should have known how to present a phony story in a manner less likely to excite suspicion of his own veracity. Besides, what does he expect Vere to do? Obviously, check his story! He could hardly expect the captain to imprison what looks like a loyal and is obviously an excellent sailor, a man the captain was planning to promote, without investigation. Hence Claggart must have had some reason to believe that an investigation would find Billy guilty. In other words, Claggart is far too intelligent to accuse a man who would quickly be shown innocent. Since he believes his accusation is justified, he is not being too careful to be tactful; he has nothing to hide. Or, perhaps, he is being extremely clever, letting the captain suspect him, “knowing” that after the captain investigates and validates his accusations, the captain will have a renewed confidence in his (Claggart’s) trustworthiness; even his most suspicious moves will not be suspected.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

Either way, one can only explain the Master-at-arms' behavior by assuming that he believes his accusations to be true, unless, of course, Melville has left here more evidence of his novel's incompleteness, another serious dramatic flaw.

IV

Handsome Sailors and Blond Virgins

Ships are but boards, sailors but men.

—*The Merchant of Venice*

The antecedents of Billy are quite as interesting as those of Claggart. As in Claggart's case, it's necessary to keep track of several strains in the earlier novels that seem to contribute to Billy's character. One is the series of "Handsome Sailors" which appear in most of the sea stories; another is a succession of "fair-haired-virtue" figures.

"Fair-Haired-Virtue" is not always characterized by fair hair, but the type is easy enough to spot by any combination of a series of traits. Fayaway, who is too native to be fair-haired, for example, in all other ways seems a forerunner of the type.⁵⁸ She has blue eyes, a lovely olive complexion, and when clothed wears white tappa; one is reminded several times also of her brilliant white teeth. In both her completely virtuous simplicity and in her relation to the narrator, she seems so much a predecessor of Yillah that one suspects Yillah must be Melville's memory of her.

In Yillah the type is completely developed. She has become a symbol of a goodness so pure that it can probably not exist on earth, and the futility of Taji's quest for her becomes analogous with the impossibility of Billy Budd's existing permanently in the man-of-war universe of the *Indomitable*. The impression of her Taji gets as he first enters her tent (on board the canoe which is bearing her to her sacrifice) is one of dazzling whiteness, made more striking in contrast to her swarthy ship-mates.⁵⁹ She is the blondest of blonds, in all probability an albino, as one is later informed.

⁵⁸ Melville, *Typee*, pp. 80-81; pp. 98 ff. and elsewhere.

⁵⁹ Melville, *Mardi*, p. 452.

The blond virgin disappears from the next books, at least in feminine form, although it is in these novels that whiteness itself takes on the enormous symbolic connotations that reach penultimate climax in *Moby-Dick*. Although the main object in this examination is to suggest that Billy stands as the last of Melville's blond virgins as well as the last of Melville's Handsome Sailors, it would be well to bear in mind that he may also stand as the last of the ambiguous white objects which seem to have haunted Melville through all his career. *Mardi* contains, besides the albino Yillah, an albino shark, previously noted, and Melville's description of its horrors ranks stylistically with celebrated passages in *Moby-Dick*. The total effect of the shark-passage is, in a smaller way, about the same as that of the "Whiteness of the Whale" discussion in *Moby-Dick*; the whiteness expresses a kind of nameless terror mixed with a fascination bordering on real love. The shark is a "ghost of a fish," solitary, "gliding just under the surface," "a long, vague shape" with a "bottomless white pit of teeth," who steals along "like a spirit in the water, with horrific serenity of aspect." This comes in Chapter XIII of *Mardi*, to my taste as good a descriptive chapter as Melville ever wrote.⁶⁰ There's no point in inserting here an essay on the meanings of white-imagery in Melville; the purpose is merely to point up one more of Melville's preoccupations which continues on into *Billy Budd*. To return to blond virgins: the type appears next in the character of Lucy Tartan in *Pierre*. Physically, Lucy has all three traits of "fair-haired-virtue." "Her cheeks were tinted with the most delicate white and red, the white predominating. Her eyes some god brought down from heaven; her hair was Danae's, spangled with Jove's shower; her teeth were dived for in the Persian Sea." In English, her eyes were blue, her complexion light, her hair blond, and, as in the other girls, her teeth unusually white. Lucy differs from Yillah in that she is not the object of a quest, but she at Saddle Meadows is the same nymph in paradise that were Fayaway in green Typee and Yillah in the

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 399-400.

little isle-bower to which Taji retired in *Mardi*.⁶¹ As in *Typee* and *Mardi*, though, the hero cannot remain blissful. Tommo tears himself away from Fayaway and Typee; Yillah vanishes; and Pierre, catching sight of the dark vision of Isabel, leaves Saddle Meadows. "The world will never see another Lucy Tartan,"⁶² Melville tells us. One could say the same of Yillah and probably, if one includes her Typean home, of Fayaway, so that in each case the leave-taking becomes a central dramatic incident in its novel. Tommo's escape from Typee closes *Typee*; Yillah's disappearance motivates Taji's journey through all of allegorical *Mardi*; to leave Lucy and Saddle Meadows is to make a complete break with a happy, shallow past and idealistically plunge into chaos. This quality is even more apparent in Billy, who seems a sort of walking paradise (witness the captain of the *Rights of Man*, from which he is impressed, who explains to the Lieutenant of the *Indomitable* that his ship was in turmoil until Billy came aboard, after which his crew became docile and friendly. Billy had by his presence turned the boisterous *Rights* into a kind of floating Saddle Meadows; the adoration of the sailors for him produced peace and unity).

The other main source of Billy, the Handsome Sailor, has roots also in Melville's earlier writing. Tommo's buddy on his ship-jumping expedition at Nukeheva harbor, in *Typee*, is a real character, yet has many of the traits of Handsome-Sailordom. "He was active, ready, and obliging, of dauntless courage, and singularly open and fearless in the expression of his feelings."⁶³ More striking, though, is this sentence: "He was one of that class of rovers you sometimes meet at sea, who never reveal their origin, never allude to home, and go rambling over the world as if pursued by some mysterious fate they cannot pos-

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 480-481.

⁶² Herman Melville, *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1930, p. 26. It is also interesting in regard to Lucy to note that she, like Billy, has had no contact with evil. As Melville has Pierre say, "I would return thee thy manifold good mornings, Lucy, did not that presume thou had'st lived through a night; and by Heaven, thou belong'st to the religions of an infinite day." (*Pierre*, p. 4.)

⁶³ Melville, *Typee*, p. 30.

sible elude.”⁶⁴ This, of course, sounds exactly like Bulkington, the “extra hero” of *Moby-Dick*, the very type of the Handsome Sailor.

Bulkington is first introduced, just after landing from a long voyage (at the New Bedford inn where Ishmael spends a night), as a Handsome Sailor around whom the crew of his whaling ship congregates. There is a loneliness about the man, however, and he leaves his ship-mates at the height of their revelry. He appears next, and for the last time, in Chapter XXIII, as the *Pequod* sails off on a miserable Christmas night; and this Handsome Sailor assumes a stature Toby—or even Billy—could never have:

When on that shivering winter's night, the *Pequod* thrust her vindictive bows into the cold malicious waves, who should I see standing at her helm but Bulkington! I looked with sympathetic awe and fearfulness upon the man, who in mid-winter just landed from a four years' dangerous voyage, could so unrestingly push off again for still another tempestuous term. The land seemed scorching to his feet. Wonderfulest things are ever the unmentionable; deep memories yield no epitaphs; this six-inch chapter is the stoneless grave of Bulkington. Let me only say that it fared with him as with the storm-tossed ship, that miserably drives along the leeward land. The port would fain give succor; the port is pitiful; in the port is safety, comfort, hearthstone, supper, warm blankets, friends, all that's kind to our mortalities. But in that gale, the port, the land, is the ship's direct jeopardy; she must fly all hospitality; one touch of land, though it but graze the keel, would make her shudder through and through. With all her might she crowds all sail off shore; in so doing, fights against the very winds that fain would blow her

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

homeward; seeks all the lashed sea's landlessness
again; for refuge's sake forlornly rushing into peril;
her only friend her bitterest foe!

Know ye now, Bulkington? Glimpses do ye
seem to see of that mortally intolerable truth; that
all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effect
of the soul to keep the open independence of her
sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth
conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish
shore?⁶⁵

In associating Bulkington with the sea half of his land-sea dichotomy, Melville has put him not only in the line of Handsome Sailors but also in the set of seekers-after-deep-truths, who leave the land in *Moby-Dick* for the sea, or who, like Pierre, leave Saddle Meadows for New York. Clearly, he is of a different stature than Toby, who, while certainly a noble enough friend, and certainly a wanderer in his own right, is also a more ordinary human being. Melville makes it plain in *Typee* that Toby is a rather moody, even erratic and eccentric person.⁶⁶ He is, again, of flesh and blood; Bulkington seems cut from granite.

The next figure of interest, after Toby, is young Wellingborough Redburn. Redburn is hardly the type of the Handsome Sailor, but he is especially relevant here. In the chapter in which Redburn "Gives Some Account of One of His Shipmates Called Jackson" appear these sentences: "And I sometimes fancied, it was the consequences of his [Jackson's] miserable, broken-down condition, and the prospect of soon dying like a dog, in consequence of his sins, that made this poor wretch

⁶⁵ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 823.

⁶⁶ For examples of Toby's personality, see *Typee*, pp. 33, 40, 47, 50, and 60. He is what can be succinctly described in modern slang as "a nice guy, but a queer duck." The example on p. 33 suggests that the sailors accepted him as an eccentric, albeit jovial, person. Pages 40 and 47 show him angry, p. 50 contains both a good sample of his sarcastic sense of humor and Tommo's conclusion that he is the best possible companion in the present adventure, and p. 60 is another example of his erratic side.

always eye me with such malevolence as he did. For I was young and handsome, at least my mother so thought me...."⁶⁷ The similarity between the Jackson-Redburn relationship and the Claggart-Billy relationship is marked; in both cases the handsome youth is hated largely for his very handsomeness. Redburn, of course, although handsome, differs from Billy in that he is not an especially good seaman, and is not very popular; he is never happy among the crew. Also, of course, he is literate, even literary, and infinitely more self-conscious than Billy. Probably he is also more complex. The early chapters, in which Melville quite touchingly recreates Redburn's boyish emotions as he travels to New York and embarks on his cruise amidst a harsh and unfriendly adult world, reveal more emotional conflict, intense social consciousness, and intellectual sensitivity than Billy could conceivably possess.

Yet Redburn is still naïve; like Billy he has had no contact with the realities of evil. His is a "young inland imagination" in a world in which, as in *Moby-Dick*, inland things are comfortable, and one must go to sea to seek reality. In *Billy Budd*, the dichotomy is a bit different. Billy's upstate New York is *The Rights of Man* and his early experiences; his sea is the *Indomitable*. Were Redburn popular and an experienced sailor (indeed, the two are linked; were he an experienced sailor, he would probably be popular) he would be nearer Billy than Bulkington or even Jack Chase. For that matter, had young Wellingborough Jack's popularity or Jack Wellingborough's naivete the result would be another Billy Budd. And yet one suspects that for Redburn to gain experience would involve his losing his innocence. The fact that Billy, who is experienced, is also innocent, is one of the reasons that Billy stays rather flat and unreal. Even as Redburn is, he represents a possible personal experience of a situation not unlike Billy's. As a babe in a cruel world, he is in basically Billy's dramatic position, and he is also the young Melville, for of all the narratives of Herman Melville's own adventures, *Redburn* is the most nearly autobiographical. Perhaps this is because it is a pot-boiler, but

⁶⁷ Melville, *Redburn*, p. 1504.

at any rate one feels there has been very little juggling of facts. It is certainly the frankest of Melville's works. The man really seems to be sitting at his desk writing all he can remember of the first great adventure of his young manhood. He is often writing so quickly that he misses events, and several times says, in effect, "Oh, yes, before I forget, there's an incident worth telling that belongs a few chapters back." Even the attempts at artistry seem to be a hurried job, and, remarkably, they come off all the better for it.⁶⁸ For the purpose of the thesis regarding Billy's antecedents, such passages are excellent, for they give Redburn a freshness and innocence unmatched by any other Melville hero but Billy. Whether Billy's mind associates boots and collars (see note 69) with its concept of what life is like one never knows, of course, because Billy's story is not told by Billy. The equivalence of innocents is the only point, and the two do not long remain equivalent, for Billy remains pristine while Redburn matures all too quickly; "upon his young soul the mildew has fallen, and the fruit, which with others is only blasted after ripeness, with him is nipped in the first blossom and bud. [One wants to substitute 'Budd']. And never again can such blights be made good; they strike in too deep and leave such a scar that the air of Paradise might not erase it."⁶⁹

⁶⁸ For example, whether the boyhood memories at the start are completely autobiographical or not, they are well-handled and structurally justified. Perhaps because Melville is writing so quickly, trains of associations in the hero's mind, which is to a great extent Melville's mind, emerge with remarkable clarity, and the resultant portrait is that of the boy's original mental imagery. The land-sea relationship is not yet understood ("most of my thoughts of the sea were connected with the land" [Melville, *Redburn*, p. 1470]), and little symbols of a youngster's unconscious associations come through splendidly. For example again:

....I tried hard to think how such places must look of rainy days and Saturday afternoon; and whether indeed they did have rainy days and Saturdays there, just as we did here; and whether the boys went to school there, and studied geography, and wore their shirt collars turned over, and tied with a black ribbon; and whether their papas allowed them to wear boots instead of shoes, which I so much disliked, for boots looked so manly. [*ibid.*]

⁶⁹ Melville, *Redburn*, p. 1474.

There exist, then, a series of possible ancestries for the young foretopman: in some degree, each makes itself evident in the novella. There is, for example, an almost troubling amount of feminine imagery used in the description of Billy in Chapter II. The theory that this may serve to heighten a repressed homosexual attraction of Claggart toward the young seaman sounds fairly plausible, and, if true, would make the Claggart-Billy relationship even less clean-cut than was intimated in the previous chapter; Claggart's innermost motives would then seem something more than "Pale ire, envy and despair."⁷⁰ (Such an interpretation, since it deals with Claggart's original motives, in no way impairs the conclusions reached in the discussion of Claggart's method as outlined previously in this paper.) From the standpoint of continuity of techniques in Melville, the passage is fairly easy to handle: when Melville wants to create an image of purity and innocence, he uses the devices he earlier applied to his blond virgins. Billy has "a lingering adolescent expression in the as yet smooth face all but feminine in purity," which, were it not for the hardening effects of seagoing, would show ever more of the "lily" and the "rose" in his complexion. Describing Billy's status on the *Indomitable*, Melville continues to use feminine comparisons. "As the *handsome sailor* Billy Budd's position was something analogous to that of a rustic beauty transplanted from the provinces and brought into competition with the high-born dames of the court."⁷¹

The Handsome Sailor strain has been present since the first chapter, and Melville, after illustrating what a Handsome Sailor represents, has Captain Graveling of *The Rights of Man* (the ship from which Billy is impressed) give an account of Billy's career under his command. Billy had, as previously mentioned, been "like a Catholic priest making peace in an Irish shindy."⁷² Graveling's anecdotal narration of the manner in which Billy handled the bully of the merchantman's crew, Red Whiskers, is quite interesting in the light of the later events on board the man-of-war.

⁷⁰ Freeman, *Melville's Billy Budd*, p. 190.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 144-145.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 139.

They [the sailors of the *Rights*] took to him like hornets to treacle; all but the bluffer of the gang, the big shaggy chap with the fire-red whiskers. He indeed out of envy, perhaps, of the newcomer, and thinking such a "sweet and pleasant fellow," as he mockingly designated him to the others, could hardly have the spirit of a game-cock, must needs bestir himself in trying to get up an ugly row with him. Billy forebode with him and reasoned with him in a pleasant way—he is something like myself, lieutenant, to whom aught like a quarrel is hateful—but nothing served. So, in the second dog-watch one day the Red Whiskers in presence of the others, under pretence of showing Billy just whence a sirloin steak was cut—for the fellow had once been a butcher—insultingly gave him a dig under the ribs. Quick as lightning Billy let fly his arm. I dare say he never meant to do quite as much as he did, but anyhow he gave the burly fool a terrible drubbing.⁷³

This is the action of Handsome Sailor in its full, almost mythic, sense. It is the type of action one might expect from a Percy Royal-Mast. Percy was the hero of a ship-board theatrical on the *Neversink* in *White-Jacket*, and his part was played, inevitably, by Jack Chase himself. Percy's lusty adventures are those of a type of folk-hero, and the sailor audience on the American man-of-war cheers uncontrollably at his every act. Such actions seem more like what could be expected of the massive Negro,⁷⁴ whom Melville uses in *Billy Budd* to illustrate his explanation of Handsome Sailors, than of the quiet Billy of the later chapters, but, as the passage above demonstrates, there is a good deal of this aspect of Handsome Sailordom about Billy. The only glimpses of it in the later novel come in

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

the infrequent allusions to a sort of boisterous jollity, as Billy is enjoying at mess the day he spills his soup before Claggart.

Much more characteristic, however, is the innocence, almost timidity, implicit in the following excerpt from Chapter IX. Billy has just witnessed his first scourging:

....Billy was horrified. He resolved that never through remissness would he make himself liable to such a visitation or do or omit aught that might merit even verbal reproof.⁷⁵

This, of course, is not the action of the folk-hero Sailor, the defender of seaman's rights that Percy Royal-Mast or even Jack Chase represents. There exists, in short, an interesting dramatic conflict within Melville's characterization of Billy Budd. As innocence incarnate he cannot quite be the Handsome Sailor in the sense in which that term is explained either in the earlier novels or in the first chapter of *Billy Budd*. It is just possible that this is the reason Melville avoids telling many incidents or anecdotes about Billy's daily life aboard ship. The more he tells, the less flat Billy seems, and it is really necessary that Billy be quite flat for him to be completely innocent. That Melville offers so few glimpses of Billy's actions helps prove the point, but makes it rather difficult to illustrate. Perhaps the following passage, however, will serve to show what difficulties would ensue were Melville to give much detailed account of Billy's life. Billy has just had his misty interview with the Afterguardsman, and has resentfully sent him away.

"Hello, what's the matter?" here came growling from a forecastleman awakening from his deck-doze by Billy's raised voice. And as the foretopman reappeared and was recognized by him; "Ah *Beauty*, is it you? Well something must have been the matter for you st-st-stuttered."

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

“Oh,” rejoined Billy, now mastering the impediment; “I found an afterguardsman in our part of the ship here and I bid him be off where he belongs.”⁷⁶

Billy’s reply is a nice piece of temporizing, quickly thought out, and near enough to the truth to be believable. But it’s evident that many such incidents would trouble a reader’s idea of Billy’s complete naivete. In at least two places, Melville attempts to explain away such difficulty; one is in Chapter II, in which Melville, having introduced Billy’s speech defect as a “striking instance that the arch interferer, the envious marplot of Eden still has more or less to do with every human consignment to this planet of earth,” goes on to say,

The avowel of such an imperfection in the Handsome Sailor should be evidence not alone that he is not presented as a conventional hero, but also that the story in which he is the main figure is no romance.⁷⁷

All of which seems to imply that Billy is to be presented as a human being, with rather more depth than complete perfection would allow.

The other instance of Melville’s consciousness of the problem comes in Chapter XVII. Melville must account for Billy’s inability to comprehend Claggart’s malice, and he does so by informing his readers that “as a class, sailors are in character a juvenile race.”⁷⁸ In attempting to show Billy as juvenile, Melville doubtless succeeds; but were more of Billy shown, some of the juvenility might be lost. On the other hand, such minor blemishes would be more in keeping with the promise of Chapter II. Melville cannot succeed in both, and, one is forced to admit, he fails in his attempt to give Billy depth.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 199-200.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

The stuttering comes to be not a sign of imperfection, but, as will be illustrated in the chapter on physical disability in *Billy Budd*, a technical device to give a childish hero more heroic stature. What is probably at the root of the difficulty is Melville's own honesty; his view of human nature, another topic to be discussed in a later chapter, is too realistic to allow him to create a completely flat, unambiguous figure, even when, structurally, his novel almost seems to demand one. When a blond virgin became an allegorical figure, she was flattened, and Yillah seems like Fayaway with the blood drained out of her. But Melville hasn't quite the heart to perform such blood-letting on a Handsome Sailor. Billy, although certainly less real than a Jack Chase, still retains elements of a fleshy Handsome Sailor. He is at once insipid and full-blooded.

Perhaps one subjective observation will be allowed in the midst of this fact-ridden paper. There is one passage in *Billy Budd* which, at least to me, seems to summarize symbolically the various elements in Billy's character with hardly a mention of any one of them. As in many passages in which Melville utilizes several of his best developed devices—in this case, white imagery and the physical setting of a ship-world—its dramatic effect is stunning. The language itself is skillfully selected. Word and phrases like “lumbering,” “hampered with cumbersome harness,” “lintstocks lodged in loops overhead,” or “heavy hempen breechings tarred to the same [black] tint,” set a funereal backdrop against which one sees Billy in solid white. Their bulky blackness and the rhythm of their arrangement—the alliterations “lodged in loops” and “heavy hempen,” for example—heighten the effect. But there is something in the mood of the paragraph which, in what I admit to be a subjective way, gives an uneasy ambiguity to Billy himself. Perhaps this is due in a large part to the use of soiled white, which, in my own Melville-drenched mind stirs up memories of the comments on soiled white in the opening chapter of *White-Jacket*, in which the narrator's jacket seems at once a shroud, a mark

of separateness, an also something most holy; or of the range of meanings associated with white in *Moby-Dick*. Hence there is something strangely disturbing in the scene where Billy as a saint amidst the black booming evil of a man-of-war lies on the gun-deck in his soiled white ducks. Lurking beneath the surface of the first Melville paradise, Typee, was an uneasy base of evil, mystery, and cannibalism. Billy, as a walking paradise, and the last Melville paradise, seems to this writer to be also undercut with ambiguity. The white and feminine imagery of the early part of the novel, with its echoes of *The Ambiguities*, helps not at all, but the passage could create uneasiness if it stood by itself. Billy, on the night preceding his execution, is described as follows:

On the starboard side of the *Indomitable's* upper gun-deck, behold Billy Budd under sentry lying prone in irons in one of the bays formed by the regular spacing of the guns comprising the batteries on either side. All these pieces were of the heavier caliber of that period. Mounted on lumbering wooden carriages, they were hampered with cumbersome harness of breeching and strong side-tackles for running them out. Guns and carriages, together with the long rammers and shorter lintstocks lodged in loops overhead—all these, as customary, were painted black; and the heavy hempen breechings tarred to the same tint, wore the like livery of undertakers. In contrast with the funereal tone of these surroundings, the prone sailor's exterior apparel, white jumper and white duck trousers, each more or less soiled, dimly glimmered in the obscure light of the bay like a patch of discolored snow in early April lingering at some upland cave's black mouth. In effect he is already in his shroud, or the garments that shall serve him in lieu of one.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 257-268.

V

The Ship-World

They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters; these see the works of the Lord, and his wonders in the deep.

—Psalms, CVII: 23-24

It is consistent with the method thus far pursued—that of discussing precedents for elements within *Billy Budd*—to continue the process in dealing with physical setting. As before, the tracing process will be started at a point at which one can not be absolutely certain that the usage—in this case, the utilization of the world of a ship as a microcosm—is conscious on Melville's part, and will be dropped after a discussion of the first novel in which it is fully developed. In this case, that involves first an examination of *Redburn*, and then of *White-Jacket*. It will not be necessary to go into *Moby-Dick*, for, besides the fact that Claret's *Neversink* is more like Vere's *Indomitable* than it is like Ahab's *Pequod*, the usage under examination is, if anything, more fully exploited in *White-Jacket* than in *Moby-Dick* where, rather than giving reams of mundane ship detail, Melville is more interested in the *Pequod*'s specialized functions, from which he will derive some of the major symbols of his world. In *Redburn*, published in 1849, can be found examples of most of the usages which, when fully developed, will turn a ship into a ship-world. One can hope, in this examination of physical details, to find a good deal of repetition of techniques; this would suggest that such a manner of thinking of ships had become habitual to Melville, an assumption which will be quite useful when examining *Billy Budd*.

Such usages fall into several categories. First, there is the basic dichotomy between land and sea, with the suggestion that there is something more profound in the sea. Second, there is the actual division of a ship into areas which are treated as social pigeon-holes, typing, by location, the characters there

residing. Growing out of this sort of usage is a third, more informal category, names, nicknames and associations which are based upon parts of the ship or upon ship-duties and which carry qualitative judgements corresponding to the part of ship or type of duty referred to. Finally, there is the "cashing in" on all these, the actual utilization of such physical-based elements for dramatic purposes.

The land-sea dichotomy appears very early and very effectively in *Redburn*.⁸⁰ Redburn, as a youth, has no real comprehension of what the sea is; his ideas are those comfortable, land-associated ideas Melville says are less profound than the stark absolutes of the sea. This is before the boy's exposure to evil, and he speaks of himself as having a "young inland imagination." "During my early life," he says later, "most of my thoughts of the sea were connected with the land."⁸¹ That is, he was unable to comprehend the doubt-provoking matters associated with the sea, and so could only apply to it what lay within his experience.

Once on board the *Highlander*, one quickly begins to feel a sort of stratification setting in. Listen to Redburn in Chapter XVI, during his first trip aloft: "A gull, or some sort of sea-fowl, was flying round the truck over my head, within a few yards of my face; and it almost frightened me to hear it; it seemed so much like a spirit, at such a lofty and solitary height." Kind of a first faint glimmer of the setting for some of the magnificent scenes aloft on the *Neversink* or the *Pequod*, or of the location for Jack Chase's or Billy Budd's aerial clubs.

Wellington's visit to an Indian ship in Liverpool gives Melville another chance to play upon location. The ship has a native-Indian crew, with a British captain and officers. "and thus, with Christianity on the quarter-deck, and paganism on the fore-castle, the *Irrawaddy* ploughed the sea."⁸² This, of course, is an example of the third and most informal usage. It

⁸⁰ There are also traces of such thinking as early as *Typee*. "Having been prohibited from approaching the sea during the whole of my stay in the valley, I had always associated it with the idea of escape," says Tommo (Melville, *Typee*, p. 169).

⁸¹ Melville, *Redburn*, p. 1470.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 1573.

is included here because, except for the nickname of one sailor ("Gun-Deck"), it is the only example of this sort of usage in *Redburn*. By *White-Jacket*, when Melville is consciously out to create a "world in a man-of-war," such references will come often enough so that one can be sure of their dramatic function. Among the sea-board novels, only *Redburn* leaves any doubt of whether Melville is merely working some nautical terms into his language; in the others—especially *White-Jacket* and *Billy Budd*—Melville so carefully lays out the ship and uses these terms so often that one can only conclude that the usage is conscious.

Still, the *Highlander* is an immigrant ship, and as such must have social barriers; Melville delineates these fully. The immigrant quarters have no conveniences, are crowded and filthy; "to hold your head down the fore hatchway was like holding it down a suddenly open cess-pool."⁸³ The immigrants are limited to a very small area; even in fine weather, they can come on deck only in the waist of the ship. The cabin-passengers are most careful to keep themselves away from these "wild Irish," and the ship's physical divisions serve to keep them separate. "Lucky would it be for the pretensions of some parvenus, whose souls are deposited at their bankers, and whose bodies but serve to carry about purses, knit of poor men's heart-strings, if thus easily they could precisely define, ashore, the difference between them and the rest of humanity."⁸⁴

These cabin passengers are detestable enough, and Wellingborough says he found himself growing to hate them. Just before describing a few in detail, he generalizes that they seemed "the most finical, miserly, mean men and women, that ever stepped over the Atlantic."⁸⁵ The point is that we are coming to type people according to location; not one of these cabin passengers is given any real credit for decency at all.

As for the last category, the "cashing in" on previously plotted-out imagery: two or three scenes only seem to draw

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 1617.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1628.

dramatic importance from the ship's layout. One is the wonderful spot just after the sailors run out of tobacco; Jackson who, characteristically still has plenty, sits cross-legged in his upper bunk and "enveloped in a cloud of tobacco smoke," looks down "upon the mourners below, with a sardonic grin at their forlornness."⁸⁶

Then, as Jackson's death approaches, Melville begins to use the sort of language that suggests that a ship can represent the world. First comes a passage faintly presaging the place in *Moby-Dick* where Melville asks God to bear him out of if, to plain mariners, he ascribes epic thought. He is comparing Jackson to the Emperor Tiberius. "And though Tiberius came in the succession of the Caesars....yet do I account this Yankee Jackson full as dignified a personage as he, and as well meriting his lofty gallows in history; even though he was a nameless vagabond without an epitaph, and none, but I, narrate what he was. For there is no dignity in wickedness, whether in purple or rags; and hell is a democracy of devils, where all are equals."⁸⁷

Then, when a malignant fever breaks out among the immigrants in steerage, Melville plays upon the relationship he has built up between steerage and cabin. The hypocritical cabin passengers, terrified by fear of the disease, become suddenly religious. In a passage which sounds very much like White-Jacket's warning that there is a Cape Horn in all lives, Wellingborough Redburn says, "Strange, though almost universal, that the seemingly nearer prospect of that death which anybody at anytime may die, should produce these spasmodic devotions, when an everlasting Asiatic Cholera is forever thinning our ranks; and die by death we all must at last"⁸⁸; and the *Highlander*, for just his moment, assumes the universality of a ship-world. The *Neversink*, in contrast, always has that universality.

It is not only Melville's talent as a story teller that makes *White-Jacket* an effective book. Burdened as it is with didac-

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1636.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1637.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1644.

tic material, the *Neversink* might have sunk beneath the load. Viewed in a linear way, even its narrative passages should not stand up as well as they do, for the novel's action is little more than a series of comparatively unrelated incidents, tied together, it would at first seem, only by the character of White-Jacket and by the fact that they all happen on a single cruise.

Nor could the author's device of using the frigate as a kind of microcosmic world ordinarily add much unity; there would be too much inconsistency between straight allegory and the purely shipboard incidents that make up most of the action. That is, were Melville merely trying to set up a miniature world by relating various elements on board ship to elements in a society at large, the result would be a rather static affair, and the ship-board occurrences would seem rather out of place, since it would be impossible to make them represent large events ashore without repressing their inherent nautical characteristics. It is precisely this sort of incongruity which makes most of the islands in *Mardi* so dead; the actions of the Mardians are neither those of natives nor those of civilized people, but rather those of figures in an allegory.

What Melville creates instead is less a mimic of an particular social setup than a working dramatic framework, recreating, certainly, aspects of a world society, but recreating them to serve primarily as a flexible stage. The allegory is very informal, but the staging is carefully executed. The ship-world is broken up into dramatically meaningful compartments, and the technique most frequently used to do so is height-imagery.

Above at various times are birds. The first mention occurs in Chapter II, when the white jacket itself is mistaken for an albatross.⁸⁹ Next, during the dog-days off Cape Horn, in the midst of a description of scenes of revelry, Melville suddenly says, "The din frightened the sea-fowl, that few by with accelerated wing."⁹⁰ These two references seem bits of imagery used purely for effect, but Melville builds upon them in later passages until birds come to have a fixed meaning. His next

⁸⁹ Melville, *White-Jacket*, p. 1113.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1171.

mention is of the toucan, whose “perch is on the loftiest trees, whence it looks down upon all humble fowls....” Here is an echo of what Melville is doing on board the ship, that is, stratifying his society in terms of height. Such usage is still not as strong as, say, the bird in the closing throes of *Moby-Dick*, but a later reference is quite powerful. Shenly is dead, and Jack Chase, a lofty spirit himself, whispers,

“Look aloft,...see that bird! it is the spirit of Shenly!”

Gazing upward all beheld a snow-white solitary fowl, which—whence no one could tell—had been hovering over the mainmast during the service, and was now sailing far up into the depths of the sky.⁹¹

The sky is the realm of utmost freedom and loftiest judgment.

And below is the sea, “the thrice-holy sea,”⁹² “the ocean Sahara.”⁹³ “Profane not the holy element,”⁹⁴ says Lemsford the poet. But being low, it is also a dark place, offering contrast to the jacket and to the mast. And it’s a barricade, a trap; the only revolt against the ship-world is suicide. “Quick! Corkscrew whirlpools, suck us down! world’s end overwhelm us!”⁹⁵

To get to the ship itself: if Melville is using height to signify status, then one might expect to find the noblest characters in the loftiest perches. This is the case. The maintop, over which Jack Chase presides, is a kind of exclusive social club. At various times during the novel, Melville mentions the sort of superiority its occupants feel over the rest of the crew. When, on occasion, they condescendingly invite up someone from a lower station, that person is always quite honored.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1311-1312.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 1118.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 1236.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1339.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1284.

As in *Moby-Dick*, aloft is the place to go for meditation. Says White-Jacket, "I am of a meditative humor, and at sea used often to mount aloft at night, and, seating myself on one of the upper yards, tuck my jacket about me and give loose to meditation,"⁹⁶ or, as the ship enters the harbor at Rio, "I felt like the foremost of a flight of angels, new lighted upon earth from some star in the milky way."⁹⁷ The main-top, as a matter of fact, is a "sort of oracle of Delphi, to which many pilgrims ascended, to have their perplexities or differences settled."⁹⁸ "Who were more liberal-hearted, lofty-minded, gayer, more jocund, elastic, given to fun and frolic, than the top-men....?"⁹⁹

Moving down, one sees levels continually used as social barriers. Melville devotes chapters to carefully placing and characterizing the various component stations on board ship; from the mass of materials he provides, one can draw several generalizations. The most obvious is simply that a man's location, in terms of height, determines his character. Elsewhere noted is the lugubrious title of chapter XII ("The Good or Bad Temper of Men-of-War's-Men, in a Great Degree, attributable to their Particular Stations and Duties Aboard Ship"); the interesting thing is that this always involves height. As contrasted to the noble band of foretopmen, some sailors far below decks seem animal-like, and Melville says several times that some of them so seldom venture out on deck that the sun blinds them, and no one knows them.

A second generalization: references to height and classes grow relatively less frequent as the story progresses. What Melville seems to be doing is carefully setting his elaborate stage, so that when he wants to quicken the pace for an exciting incident, mere mention of certain areas will evoke symbolic overtones in the reader's mind without any need for heavy elaboration on the author's part. For example, the first time

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1154.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1235.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1116.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1138.

Melville tells of the consequences of changing one's height-location, he is quite explicit.

A fine top-mate of ours, a most merry and companionable fellow, chanced to be promoted to a quarter-gunner's berth. A few days afterward, some of his main-top-men, his old comrades, went to pay him a visit, while he was going his regular rounds through the division of guns allotted to his care. But instead of greeting us with his usual heartiness, and cracking his pleasant jokes, to our amazement, he did little else but scowl; and at least, when we rallied him upon his ill-temper, he seized a long black rammer from overhead, and drove us on deck; threatening to report us, if ever we dared to be familiar with him again.¹⁰⁰

Melville spends several paragraphs here elaborating the idea, but having done so, he can, next time a similar change crops up, just hint at what concomitant character transformation would be involved. When, for instance, there's a chance that White-Jacket himself will be transferred to duty far beneath decks, he does not have to explain his horror at being so moved.

Another way Melville stratifies his ship is through names themselves. The custom of giving nicknames to men according to their stations or according to their characteristics, is, one may suppose, legitimate sailor practice, but in *White-Jacket* this custom takes on qualities of qualitative judgement. Selvagee, a lieutenant, for example, is named after a peculiarly elegant kind of rope; the name is perfect for characterizing this "tall, limber, spiralizing exquisite"¹⁰¹ of an officer. When Jack Chase appears in a play, his name is "Percy Royal-Mast,"¹⁰² the association is lofty and solid.

A related device appears during that operation scene, when, after tagging the surgeon with the most revolting of associa-

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1136.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1128.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 1164 ff.

tions Melville says that the patient had once had “an arm like a royal-mast and a thigh like a windlass,”¹⁰³ more wholesome references. This sort of usage is very flexible, and Melville utilizes it fully in some of the novel's finest passages. Speaking of an unnecessary death caused by an officer's goading a man on to recklessness in order to win a race among several ships in furling their sails, he says, “. . . and thus do the people of the gun-deck suffer, that the commodore on the poop may be glorified.”¹⁰⁴ The value judgement involved in the words “poop” and “gun-deck” is value judgement based on associations that the author has constructed about those two areas. *White-Jacket* often speaks thus, particularly when Melville is angry and wishes to accentuate the artificial exclusiveness of the officers. Why should he feel like a “peasant before a prince's palace” when he passes the captain's cabin? or, “why this contrast between the forecandle and the quarter-deck?”

The climax of such protest comes in this following passage, and it will be noted how thoroughly its effectiveness rests upon place and height associations: “when virtue sits high aloft on a frigate's poop, when virtue is crowned in the cabin as a commodore, when virtue rules by compulsion, and domineers over vice as a slave, then virtue, though her mandates be outwardly observed, bears little interior away. To be efficacious, virtue must come down from aloft, even as our blessed Redeemer came down to redeem our who man-of-war world. . . .”¹⁰⁵

Such a carefully laid out universe gives a wonderful physical framework for the book's action, action which might otherwise falter under the strain of the many didactic chapters—for *White-Jacket* is a protest novel, full of discussions of naval law, of legal and even literary comment, and of many disjointed events. Put in their proper niches in the vessel, though, even such dissertations seem explorations into hitherto unseen sections of the man-of-war universe.

A fine illustration of the manner in which the author can vary the use of this multi-level setting appears at the close of

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 1263.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1226.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 1245-1246.

White-Jacket when the narrator falls from the topmast shrouds into the ocean. Earlier in the novel, Melville had said, in explaining how the royal yard forms a cross with the mast, that “falling from that lofty cross....is almost like falling from the cross of St. Paul’s; almost like falling as Lucifer from the well-spring of morning down to the Phlegethon of night.”¹⁰⁶ Now, when the narrator does fall, his fall seems a physical recapitulation of all the ship. While trying to doff the white jacket he topples from the place of glory and “flights of angels” through all the gradations—of purgatory and hell, perhaps—into the night-sea.

Here is one of those places where several strains which run through all Melville seem to congeal for a major dramatic incident. Besides the height imagery, for example, this passage makes use of both white imagery and the human physique. Throughout the novel, the white jacket has been a sign of the narrator’s separateness from most of the crew; the sailors superstitiously fear it. When *White-Jacket* tries to get rid of it at a ship’s auction and fails, he confesses that even he has begun to be afraid of the thing. At any rate, it serves to symbolize

White-Jacket’s separateness from the crew; he is to be an Ishmael, at home really with none but his friends in the mainmast and a very select group of kindred souls. He is, for example, rudely tossed out of the social circle of his mess. There is still a bit of Redburn in him, and though he is a far better sailor, reveals less of Redburn’s snobbish feeling of superiority, and is comparatively more popular, he still suffers an uncomfortable separateness.

One part of the transformation that can give him the acceptance he needs to become an integrated member of this shipboard society is symbolized by removal of the white jacket and the sort of baptism he undergoes during this same scene. The jacket, as Melville has several times intimated and as the language of the passage implies, has come to represent almost a part of his body. The passage represents the knitting together

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1226.

of so many strains in Melville's writing that it is worthy of close examination:

With the end of the line in one hand, I was mounting the top-mast shrouds, when our captain of the top told me that I had better off jacket; but though it was not a very cold night, I had been reclining so long in the top, that I had become somewhat chilly, so I thought not to comply with the hint.

Having reeved the line through all the inferior blocks, I went out with it to the end of the weather-top-gallant-yard-arm, and was in the act of leaning over and passing it through the suspended jewel-block there, when the ship gave a plunge in the sudden swells of the calm sea, and pitching me still farther over the yard, threw the heavy skirts of my jacket right over my head, completely muffling me. Somehow I thought it was the sail that had flapped, and, under that impression, threw up my hands to drag it from my head, relying upon the sail itself to support me meanwhile. Just then the ship gave another sudden jerk, and, head foremost, I pitched from the yard. I knew where I was, from the rush of the air by my ears, but all else was a nightmare. A bloody film was before my eyes, through which, passed and repassed my father, mother, and sisters. An unutterable nausea oppressed me; I was conscious of gasping; there seemed no breath in my body. It was over one hundred feet that I fell—down, down, with lungs collapsed as in death. Ten thousand pounds of shot seemed tied to my head, as the irresistible law of gravitation dragged me, head foremost end straight as a die, toward the infallible centre of this terraqueous globe. All I had seen, and read, and heard, and all I had thought and felt in

my life, seemed intensified in one fixed idea in my soul. But dense as this idea was, it was made up of atoms. Having fallen from the projecting yard-arm end, I was conscious of a collected satisfaction in feeling, that I should not be dashed on the deck, but would sink into the speechless profound of the sea.

With the bloody, blind film before my eyes, there was a still stranger hum in my head, as if a hornet were there; and I thought to myself, Great God! this is death! Yet these thoughts were unmixed with alarm. Like frost-work that flashes and shifts its scared hues in the sun, all my braided, blended emotions were in themselves icy cold and calm.

So protracted did my fall seem, that I can even now recall the feeling of wondering how much longer it would be, ere all was over and I struck. Time seemed to stand still, and all the worlds seemed poised on their poles, as I fell, soul-becalmed, through the eddying whirl and swirl of the Maelstrom air.

At first, as I have said, I must have been precipitated head foremost; but I was conscious, at length, of a swift, flinging motion of my limbs, which involuntarily threw themselves out, so that at the last minute I must have fallen in a heap. This is more likely, from the circumstance, that when I struck the sea, I felt as if someone had smote me slantingly across the shoulder and along part of my right side.

As I gushed into the sea, a thunder-boom sounded in my ear; my soul seemed flying from my mouth. The feeling of death flooded over me with the billows. The blow from the sea must have

turned me, so that I sank almost feet foremost through a soft, seething, foamy lull. Some current seemed hurrying me away; in a trance I yielded, and sank deeper down with a glide. Purple and pathless was the deep calm now around me, flecked by summer lightnings in an azure afar. The horrible nausea was gone; the bloody, blind film turned a pale green; I wondered whether I was alive or dead, or still dying. But of a sudden some fashionless form brushed my side—some inert, coiled fish of the sea; the thrill of being alive again tingled in my nerves, and the strong shunning of death shocked me through.

For one instant an agonizing revulsion came over me as I found myself utterly sinking. Next moment the force of my fall was expended; and there I hung, vibrating in the mid-deep. What wild sounds then rang in my ear! One was a soft moaning, as of low waves on the beach; the other wild and heartlessly jubilant, as of the sea in the height of a tempest. Oh soul! thou then heardest life and death: as he who stands upon the Corinthian shore hears both the Ionian and the Aegean waves. The life-and-death poise soon passed; and then I found myself slowly ascending, and caught a dim glimmer of light. Quicker and quicker I mounted; till at last I bounded up like a buoy, and my whole head was bathed in the blessed air.

I had fallen in a line with the main-mast; I now found myself nearly abreast of the mizen-mast, the frigate sliding slowly by like a black world in the water. Her vast hull loomed out of the night, showing hundreds of seamen in the hammock-nettings, some tossing over ropes, others madly flinging overboard the hammocks; but I was too far out

from them immediately to reach what they threw. I essayed to swim toward the ship; but instantly I was conscious of a feeling like being pinioned in a feather-bed, and moving my hands, felt my jacket puffed out above my tight girdle with water. I strove to tear it off; but it was looped together here and there, and the strings were not then to be sundered by hand.¹⁰⁷

It is, then, the jacket that causes the fall; appropriately, the narrator has unknowingly been drawn into it until he does not know where he is; for an instant, he thinks it is a sail, and in that instant, falls.

The fall itself is to represent the end of a life—White-Jacket's life as an isolatto—and Melville, during it, presents the images in the mind of a dying man; visions of his family pass “ghost-like” before his eyes, and White-Jacket says, “All I had seen, and read, and heard, and all I had thought and felt in my life, seemed intensified in one fixed idea in my soul.” The sense of finality, even of resolution, is made stronger yet by the next, sentences, in which White-Jacket speaks of “a collected satisfaction in feeling, that [he] should not be dashed on the deck, but would sink into the speechless profound of the sea.” And so again in Melville the sea itself offers resolution: Tommo longing to reach a sea which for him represents freedom, or the *Pequod* settling into a sea which is to end Ahab's quest so thoroughly that the ship drags with it into its own creamy vortex not on itself but its lone remaining whale boat, “and all its crew, and each floating oar, and every lance-pole,” or White-Jacket undergoing a spiritual rebirth through baptism in the sea, or Billy, singing through the sailor who wrote these doggerel lines:

Just ease these derbies at the wrist,
And roll me over fair.
I am sleepy, and the oozy weeds about me twist.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 1341–1342.

"Great God! this is death!" White-Jacket thinks as he falls, but the climactic moment in the spiritual death of the "old" White-Jacket comes as he hits the water. "...[M]y soul seemed flying from my mouth. The feeling of death flooded over me with the billows...." His sensations are stagnant, his mentality passive as he sinks "through a soft, seething, foamy lull." There is no sense of his being able to struggle; he says, "...in a trance I yielded." Even the gradual return of normal sensations—the passing of his nausea and the clearing of his vision, so that he knows his surroundings are green—does not snap him from his trance ("I wondered whether I was yet dead, or still dying"). It is his contact with "some inert, coiled fish of the sea" which shocks him into alertness, and he begins to fight to live. In contrast with the dazed, vague sense impressions of the previous paragraph, the observations in the paragraph beginning, "For one instant" are sharp, busy, even brilliant.

There is a feeling of discovery throughout the remainder of the passage. The three major changes in White-Jacket's situation as he fights to save himself are expressed thus: "I found myself utterly sinking," "I found myself slowly ascending," and, after he reaches the surface, "I now found myself nearly abreast of the mizen-mast." White-Jacket has, of course, "found himself" in more than such a literal sense, and his next action further emphasizes this. Seeing the "frigate slowly gliding by like a black world in the water," the now-determined White-Jacket tries to swim toward it, but, ironically, his jacket holds him back. Says White-Jacket,

I whipped out my knife...and ripped my jacket straight up and down, *as if I were ripping open myself*. [italics mine] Heavily soaked, it sank before my eyes.

Sink! sink! oh shroud! thought I; sink forever!
accursed jacket that thou art!

“See that white shark!” cried a horrified voice from the taffrail; “he’ll have that man down his hatchway: Quick! the *grains!* the *grains!*”

The next instant that barbed bunch of harpoons pierced through and through the unfortunate jacket, and swiftly sped down with it out of sight.

Thus White-Jacket’s salvation has involved not only purgation-through-falling, and purgation-through-immersion, but also purgation through ridding himself of the manifold associations built up around the white jacket, and, one is tempted to add, purgation through what sounds almost like amputation.

Although the technique of this paper is to trace continuities just far enough to define clearly how Melville utilizes them, and though by the preceding passages one finds height imagery developed to a state of great dramatic effectiveness, it is tempting to briefly point out that such usage continues into *Moby Dick*. In Ahab’s *Pequod*, Melville uses both height imagery and the sort of compartmentalizing of a ship into meaningful areas we observed in the *Neversink*. There is less formal stage setting; it would be impossible on this little whale-ship, for example, for various regular members of the crew to have tasks so specialized that they never see most of their ship-mates. The one time Melville tries anything like this, when he has Ahab hide Fedallah and his devilish boat crew, it must be admitted that the whole matter seems unreasonable. On the other hand, Melville can and does assign symbolic meaning to various parts of the *Pequod*. One illustration should be sufficient: as on board the *Neversink*, aloft is the place for lofty thought. The t’gallant-mast of the *Pequod* is described in detail in Chapter XXXV. A catalogue passage builds up associations with “that point of human grandeur beyond which few mortals will go,” with meditation (“let me make a clean breast of it here, and frankly admit that I kept but sorry guard. With the problems of the universe revolving in me, how could I—being left alone at such a thought-engendering altitude—how could I but lightly

hold up obligations...)¹⁰⁸ but also with the constant peril of falling. After a light-hearted bit of advice to ship owners to beware of philosophical young lookouts who never spot whales, he continues, "But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch; slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror."¹⁰⁹

The similarity to *White-Jacket* is striking; it was just such a fall that did bring back White-Jacket's identity in horror. The point here is that the general technique, the building upon the natural functions of the various parts of a ship until they come to have real symbolic importance, has by this time become a permanent part of Melville's literary vocabulary.

One can be quite sure that in Melville's mind the *Neversink* and the *Indomitable* were the same ship. Biography itself would seem to show this; the *United States (Neversink)* was the only man-of-war on which he served. Fortunately, it is not necessary to rely upon biography; there is ample evidence in the texts of the two novels to demonstrate that, whatever was the real physical arrangement of the ships, the same symbolic frame of reference was in operation.

Before beginning any detailed comparison, however, a word of caution. *Billy Budd* is a novella; *White-Jacket*, an extended novel. For this reason alone, one should not expect to find in *Billy* the fully drawn, detailed symbolic stage-setting possible in a longer work. What can be expected is the use of some manner of symbolic shorthand. We have already seen that in several novels there was a marked change of style as the work progressed. In both *White-Jacket* and in *Moby-Dick*, for example, we noted that the author spent chapters carefully setting scenes, describing large and minute details of the ship's construction, rigging, and physical lay-out. Thus in the late chapters of each novel such descriptions were no longer necessary. The reader already had established in his mind physical details, often symbolically meaningful, that could be evoked by just a word or two. As a result, the pace could be quickened

¹⁰⁸ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 853.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 854.

when need be—during the fall or during the quarter deck ordeal in *White-Jacket*; during the chase chapters in *Moby-Dick*. Now, Melville seems to have been writing *Billy Budd* primarily for himself.¹¹⁰ This and the novel's brevity make it reasonable to assume that there was neither the space nor the need to establish the symbolic framework with pages of details about the ship. The novelist could rather start right out as though this preliminary work had already been done.

Even so, there is a good deal of similarity in the way Melville talks of the *Indomitable*; the phraseology of a ship-world is still being used. This continuity makes itself evident both in minor, casual references and in more formal scenic attempts. When tracing the histories of past mutinies, Melville says things like "So it was that for a time on more than one quarter-deck anxiety did exist."¹¹¹ When summarizing Claggart's speech to Vere, he says "...he [Claggart] had begun to suspect that on the gun-decks [that is, among the common sailors] some sort of movement prompted by the sailor in question [Billy] was covertly going on...."¹¹² These are, admittedly, the most casual of references.

A second group, however, is more reminiscent of *White-Jacket*: as on board the *U.S.S. Neversink*, certain areas on board the *H.M.S. Indomitable* pick up social and symbolic overtones. There is, for example the same feeling of camaradie among the members of the foretop; "the topmen, who as such had been picked out for youth and activity, constituted a sort of aerial club, lounging at ease against the smaller stunsails rolled up into cushions, spinning yarns like the lazy gods, and frequently amused with what was going on in the busy world of the decks below."¹¹³ This sounds exactly like a description of Jack Chase's elite and noble little circle. Or, paralleling the passage in which *White-Jacket* complains of the crowdedness of his gun-deck

¹¹⁰ See for example, Freeman's generally excellent chapter, in *Melville's Billy Budd*, "The Last Years." I have included a brief discussion of this chapter in the bibliography.

¹¹¹ Freeman, *Melville's Billy Budd*, p. 159.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 215.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

sleeping quarters is this bit, telling how Billy's hammock was "one of hundreds suspended so closely wedged together . . . that there was little or no swing to them."¹¹⁴ "They give you more swing than that at the gallows,"¹¹⁵ muttered White-Jacket, and Billy thinks so too, for he's gone on deck for his nap. And, just as certain points on the American ship offer solitude (recall, for instance, the chains, which one old sailor used as a chapel), so the British ship has its private nooks and crannies. In one of these the Afterguardsman decoys Billy for his mysterious mock-mutinous interview. The place is "a tarry balcony, overhanging the sea, and so secluded that one mariner of the Indomitable, a non-conformist old tar of serious turn, made it even in daytime his private oratory."¹¹⁶

Again, as in the earlier novel, rank and position are related; in the court scene, as noted elsewhere, Captain Vere's dual status is expressed by his having the favored side of the cabin. Later in the trial, Melville spells out a bit of height imagery. Here is Vere restlessly walking back and forth "....he to-and-fro paced the cabin athwart; in the returning ascent to windward, climbing the slant deck in the ship's lee roll; without knowing it symbolizing thus in his action a mind resolute to surmount difficulties even if against primitive instincts as strong as the wind end sea."¹¹⁷ Symbolically, the sentence is splendid. The imagery is perfect—Vere is acting against nature and knows so, but he will do so even if he must overcome "primitive instincts" rooted in nature itself, "wind and sea." As often happens, the eighteenth-century aspects of Melville's thinking crop up in his images. Vere impressed Billy from *The Rights of Man* and killed him despite natural law.

Several times Melville uses the hierarchies of status of the *Indomitable* to bolster the plot itself. When, for example, Billy lies to the Forecastleman after the visit of the Afterguardsman, the fact that Forecastlemen are very jealous of their territorial

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

¹¹⁵ Melville, *White-Jacket*, p. 1156.

¹¹⁶ Freeman, *Melville's Billy Budd*, p. 198.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

rights enables Billy to carry off his story. And, as in *White-Jacket*, dispositions and positions are related; Forecastlemen, for instance, are mostly jealous, bigoted old tars.

Two other important passages are rooted in the ship-world idea, one an almost poetic use of the microcosmic ship, the other a general statement of the author's intent to use the ship as a stage. Chapter XXVI opens, "The night so luminous on the spar-deck, but otherwise on the cavernous ones below—levels so very liked the tiered galleries in a coal mine—the luminous night passed away."¹¹⁸ Again, *Billy Budd* does not seem to have the preparing, staging passages of *White-Jacket*; it ordinarily seems to begin as if the stage were ready-set. One very often feels such a setting—as in all the examples up to this one—but here can be seen the same old framework in Melville's mind; he is thinking in levels. So, with a lofty club in the top, the word "officer" often replaced by "quarter deck" and the word "people" replaced by "gun-deck," strict social barriers, protocol based on position, and finally an over-all division of matters into levels, our ship seems rather like the stage in a Thornton Wilder play, *The Long Christmas Dinner*, in which areas of the stage are symbolically endowed with meaning. To be born, for example, is to enter from the left; to die is to exit by a black-draped door at right. But Melville's stage is at once richer and more flexible than Wilder's. For Melville has his choice of many different stages aboard ship on which to place any particular action, and the place selected subtly alters the meaning of the action. "Passion, and passion in its proudest, is not a thing demanding a palatial stage whereon to play its part. Down among the groundlings, among the beggars and rakers of the garbage, profound passion is enacted. And the circumstances that provoke it, however trivial or mean, are no measure of its power. In the present instance the stage is a scrubbed gun-deck, and one of the external provocations a man-of-war's man's spilled soup."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

VI

Starry Vere

And folks are beginning to think it looks odd,
To choke a poor scamp for the glory of God.

—James Russell Lowell, *A Fable for Critics*

To convince anyone that Melville could never approve of what was done to Billy Budd, it is necessary to get Captain the Honorable Edward Fairfax Vere down off the high horse on which some critics have placed him. He is not a provisional finger of God, nor was he meant to be. Lawrence Thompson has quite accurately sensed that Melville never intended “Starry” Vere so lofty a mount; this paper’s rather pragmatic method would seem also to bring the captain down to earth.

Melville has given a clear, unambiguous, straightforward essay on naval officers, naval law, and the relation between the two. The essay is contained in *White-Jacket* and comes in several installments. The first occurs after Mad Jack, an often besotted yet very capable lieutenant, has countermanded the foolish orders of Captain Claret.¹²⁰ Melville asks if it is possible that there are incompetent officers in the U.S. Navy. But in his discussion, he continually evades the American navy and instead refers to Great Britain’s history to make his points. He first points out that as “a long array of ciphers, led by but one solitary numeral, swell, by mere force of aggregation, into an immense arithmetical sum”... “so, in some brilliant actions, do a crowd of officers, each inefficient in himself, aggregate renown when banded together, and led by a numeral Nelson or a Wellington.” “[I]f all the men who, since the beginning of the world, have mainly contributed to the warlike successes or reverses of nations, were now mustered together, we should be amazed to behold but a handful of heroes.”¹²¹

¹²⁰ Melville, *White-Jacket*, p. 1173.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1176.

Next comes one of those spots where Melville says that he will answer his own question as to incompetent officers by referring to the British navy, which “furnishes many more examples of all kinds than our own.”¹²² This, is course, is precisely what he will do in *Billy Budd*. Moreover, he refers to that navy in the same (Napoleonic) period, just eleven years after *Billy Budd's* date, 1808.

[I]n the year 1808—after the death of Lord Nelson—when Lord Collingwood commanded on the Mediterranean station, and his broken health induced him to solicit a furlough,...out a list of upward of one hundred admirals, not a single officer was found who was deemed qualified to relieve the applicant with credit to the country. This fact Collingwood sealed with his life; for, hopeless of being recalled, he shortly after died, worn out, at his post. Now, if this is the case in so renowned a marine as England is, what must be inferred with respect to our own? But herein no special disgrace is involved. For the truth is, that to be an accomplished and skillful naval generalissimo needs natural capabilities of an uncommon order. Still more, it may safely be asserted, that, worthily to command even a frigate requires a degree of natural heroism, talent, judgement, and integrity, that is denied to mediocrity. Yet these qualifications are not only required, but demanded; and no one has a right to be a naval captain unless he possesses them.¹²³

So Melville has said unequivocally that most of the officers of most navies—nay, of the same navy in which Vere held his post—are incompetent. The objection should here be raised that perhaps Vere was an exception, who might have gone further were he not killed before 1800. Measuring Captain Vere by the

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 1177.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

standards Melville sets for naval officers in the next installments in his essay offers a good way to find out.

These all deal with naval law. The great decision which Starry Vere must make in *Billy Budd* is essentially this: "Shall I follow the letter of the law, the law signified by the very buttons of my jacket, even if to follow that law seems to violate the clearly-defined precepts of moral justice? And, if I should not follow that law, will the immediate results of my laxity produce dangerous dissension amongst my crew?" One must therefore look to Melville for two answers, some dealing with naval law itself, the other with the results of disregarding naval law in unusual cases.

Captain Claret of the *Neversink* flogs a sailor, saying that when it comes to a matter of ship's laws he "would not forgive God Almighty!"¹²⁴ Melville says that naval laws are *wrong*, that the things that they punish are "not essentially criminal."¹²⁵ He then tells repeatedly that most such customs can safely be broken, that time-honored precedents are not infallible. When, for example, Secretary of the Navy Bancroft forbids the use of the colt (used for arbitrary beating of sailors), "the lieutenants in the navy bitterly rail against the officiousness of Bancroft, in so materially abridging their usurped functions by snatching the colt from their hands. At the time, they predicted that this rash and most ill-judged interference of the secretary would end in the breaking up of all discipline in the navy. But it has not so proved. These officers now predict that, if the 'cat' be abolished, the same unfulfilled prediction would be verified."¹²⁶

This strain continues through several pages, with Melville concluding, by quoting Blackstone, that "'there is a law coeval with mankind, dictated by God himself, superior in obligation to any other, and no human laws are of any validity if contrary to this.'" And, more important for the purpose here, such laws are not necessary.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1190.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1191.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1192.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 1196ff.

To illustrate: Captain Vere's ostensible reason for murdering Billy is one of discipline; he supposedly fears mutinous acts if the crew feels that he is lenient. Yet Melville notices repeatedly that the *Indomitable* has a pretty good crew, which has no idea of mutiny, and that Captain Vere knows this himself. Well, suppose it were a very tough, unmanageable crew—how does Melville think such a crew should be handled?

“Send them to Collingwood,” said Lord Nelson, ‘and *he* will bring them to order.’ This was the language of that renowned admiral, when his officers reported to him certain seamen of the fleet as wholly ungovernable. “Send them to Collingwood.” And who was Collingwood, that, after the navy rebels had been imprisoned and scourged without being brought to order, Collingwood could convert them to docility?¹²⁸

He was an officer...who held in abhorrence all corporal punishment; who, though seeing more active service than any sea-officer of his time yet, for years together, governed his men without inflicting the lash!¹²⁹

A really good officer, then, doesn't need brutal punishment to sustain discipline. The link between *White-Jacket* and *Billy* becomes even stronger when one considers some of the things Melville, even in 1850, said of the Royal Navy of the Napoleonic era. We have perhaps been quoting excessively, but since when Melville gets angry he gets quite terse and condensed in style, to quote is not only more accurate but also briefer than to paraphrase. The years of the Napoleonic wars, says Melville were “a period when the uttermost resources of England were taxed to the quick; when the masts of her multiplied fleets almost transplanted her forests, all standing, to the

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1196.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1197.

sea; when British press-gangs not only boarded foreign ships on the high seas, and boarded foreign pier-heads, but *boarded their own merchantmen at the mouth of the Thames....*" [italics mine] "*This* was the time and *these* the men that Collingwood governed...."¹³⁰

There are still several possible objections to applying what is said in *White-Jacket* to a novel written forty years later. Although it is by now clear what was Melville's outlook on naval officers in general, on naval law, and on abusive customs, there has thus far been discussed no real mutiny situation. Nor has that inherent respect most landsmen have for the judgement of experienced seamen been overcome.

There is a threatened mutiny aboard the *Neversink*, and the quick-minded lieutenant, Mad Jack, quells it by ignoring it and ordering the men to their stations as if nothing had happened. Captain Claret says he would have proceeded differently; he would have used the marines and probably produced bloodshed. Now Vere ostensibly dealt sternly with Billy so that he would serve as a lesson of the captain's sternness. He used the same sort of act Claret would have used—an act of force. Says Melville on the subject: "there are times when even the most potent governor must wink at transgression, in order to preserve the laws inviolate for the future. And great care is to be taken, by timely management, to avert an incontestable act of mutiny, and prevent men from being roused, by their new consciousness of transgression, into all the fury of an unbounded insurrection."¹³¹

The parallel is not wholly neat. Although the act which set it off seems far less important than Billy's execution, there is a real mutiny situation on board the *Neversink*; the rebellious men have already used force once when Mad Jack calms things down. On board the *Indomitable*, however, there is never any real threat. Considering the times and the manner in which many of these Britons came into the navy, this is a remarkably loyal crew. And the one act which does stir up resentment is the very execution which Vere says is necessary in order to keep

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1321.

the “people” in line. The fact that the crew accepts the death of Billy without violent resistance is a tribute to that crew’s loyalty, and a mockery of all the professed fears of Captain Vere. Every sailor who knows Billy Budd or knows of him also knows of his reputation. He is, after all, the Handsome Sailor, and even beyond the hero-worship involved in that status is Billy’s additional reputation for innocence and integrity. Given all this, the sailors know full well that Billy would never commit a treasonable act. And yet when they hear of what is to be done to their hero, an act which, in a crew of questionable loyalty, would probably be the signal for an open rebellion, they do no more than raise an angry murmur, which is easily dispelled. If Captain Vere had plotted the entire incident, he could have thought of no better way to infuriate the crew, and yet they are not infuriated. This is a very loyal group of tars.

Twice this crew shows signs of discontent. The first comes when their Captain addresses them and informs them at muster what has happened and what is to be done. The second occurs after Billy’s death, and it requires only a drum beat to quarters to break it up. This muster is unusual, but works very well; to explain it Melville offers us this bit of logic: “That such variance from usage was authorized by an officer like Captain Vere, a martinet as some deemed him, was evidence of the necessity for unusual action implied in what he deemed to be the temporary mood of his men.”¹³² When one remembers that this “temporary mood” is strictly his own production, his logic begins to seem foolish and even hypocritical.

This is because everything Vere has done has been based ostensibly on an assumption which the sensitive reader knows to be false. The clearest statement of it comes at the trial, when the Junior Lieutenant asks if it is not possible to “convict and yet mitigate the penalty.” Vere answers, “. . . .consider the consequences of such clemency. The people. . . .have native sense; most of them are familiar with our usage and tradition; and how would they take it? Even could you explain to them—which our position forbids—they, long molded by arbitrary

¹³² Freeman, *Melville's Billy Budd*, p. 272.

discipline, have not that kind of intelligent responsiveness that might qualify them to comprehend and discriminate.”¹³³ Even disregarding the apparent contradiction within that statement (the implication that the people are both natively intelligent and dulled by discipline to stupidity at the same time), one wonders what is wrong with Vere’s judgement. Vere goes on to say that to be lenient to Billy would lead to mutiny! But in ship-context that seems absurd; Billy is the Handsome Sailor. Did the crew of the *Neversink* lose discipline because Jack Chase was not punished for deserting? Deserting is a most serious offence, but had Claret punished Chase, then there very well might have been a mutiny. Common sense should have told Vere that the surest way to stir up trouble was to execute the Handsome Sailor. That even this, again, did not start a serious disturbance, is a tribute to the docility of the people of the *Indomitable*.

Whatever doubts one may yet have about the situation—doubts that while such logic might be perfectly good in a land-situation, conditions on board ship may be so different as to require an experienced man like Captain Vere to understand them—these, Melville assures his readers in yet another installment of his essay, are unfounded. At the close of Chapter LV, Melville says that there is no need to regard ship-matters as “altogether too technical and mysterious to be fully comprehended by landsmen,” and that it is wrong “in any way [to] contribute to the prevailing mystification” surrounding sea-affairs. Beware, he adds, of abandoning to the discretion of naval officers “those general municipal regulations touching the well-being of the great body of men before the mast,” for in such matters the officers are all too likely influenced by “long established prejudices.”¹³⁴

Vere’s actions, then, considered as the actions of a naval officer in a specific situation, seem anything but wise, and his method of bolstering his argument by using either naval law or his superior experience and rank sounds almost hypocritical. The supposed urgency of the situation—that is, the fear

¹³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 247-248.

¹³⁴ Melville, *White-Jacket*, p. 1247.

of mutiny—is a sham; Vere knows better than to believe his unusually loyal crew harbors thoughts of revolt. Moreover, his insistence on deciding Billy's fate at once is not, as he claims, demanded by or consistent with naval duty and usage. "The thing to do...was to place Billy Budd in confinement, and in a way dictated by usage, and postpone further action in so extraordinary a case to such a time as they should again join the squadron, and then refer it to the Admiral."¹³⁵

In the light of such evidence, a more detailed character sketch of Captain Vere is perhaps in order. It has been intimated that Melville that felt most British officers at this period were not unusually capable. Melville says plainly that not only is Vere no exception to this rule, but that he has several noticeable failings. Moreover, Melville gives plenty of examples of Vere's odd behavior.

To be fair to the captain, one is nowhere told that he was incompetent in the ordinary business of running a man-of-war. But to tackle the complex moral problems that Billy's act poses would require a brilliant and unfettered mind. Vere, "whatever his sturdy qualities, was without any brilliant ones,"¹³⁶ says Melville. Melville also says that Vere is something of a pedant, and an examination of a few aspects of the trial will show how his pedantry makes itself evident.

But why call a drum-head court in the first place? In the opinions of the ship's Surgeon, the lieutenants, and the Captain of Marines, such a matter should be reported to the Admiral. They are shocked to hear of the manner in which their Captain is handling the situation, and the Surgeon even wonders if Vere is mad. All are competent and experienced naval officers; their opinions should be respected. Vere is not following what they consider his intelligent duty. And the doctor's opinion is not a passing thought; he is really troubled. Were it not mutiny to disobey and insolent to argue, he would not have obeyed the

¹³⁵ Freeman, *Melville's Billy Budd*, p. 231. So thinks the ship's Surgeon, a "prudent" man of "self-poised character," "grave sense and experience." (pp. 227 and 229)

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

Captain's order to summon the court-members. Melville's language is quite firm—he says that Surgeon had “professionally and primarily surmised” that Vere was the “sudden victim” of a mental “aberration.”¹³⁷

As to that possible pedantry: note the manner in which the author describes Vere's speech to the court.

When speak he did, something both in the substance of what he said and in his manner of saying it showed the influence of unshared studies, modifying and tempering the practical training of an active career. This, along with his phraseology now and then was suggestive of the grounds whereon rested that imputation of a certain pedantry socially alleged against him by certain naval men of wholly practical cast....¹³⁸

Vere is, then, inserting into his speech the phrases and references of a scholar. As Melville says,¹³⁹ Vere's case in the minds of these officers is largely carried by their respect for his superior mind and rank. They are “loyal lieges, plain and

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 233. The first pages of the chapter in which this opinion is passed form one of the most interesting passages in the novel, and from the standpoint of anyone trying to derive any systematized pattern from the book, one of the most puzzling. Its reasoning could be summarized as follows: the surgeon, a competent and sagacious officer, fears for Vere's sanity, and Melville says the reader must judge for himself in the light of the story's further development. The unfortunate blow had been struck in troubled times, and Billy was, technically, the guilty party. In treating the matter in such a mysterious manner, especially in keeping it secret, Vere was following a policy which resembled a Russian palace tragedy, and in doing so he “may or may not have erred.” (p. 235.) Although the right thing to do would have been to postpone decision until an Admiral's judgement could be consulted—indeed, Vere would rather have done that—he feels it is his duty to be monastically firm. He does not want the entire responsibility on his own shoulders, and so summons the court. All of which is not much of a case if 1) there is no danger of mutiny, or 2) moral law is to be ranked above naval precedents and regulations, or 3) naval precedents *themselves* demand not immediate actions, but postponement.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

practical,"¹⁴⁰ and will accept what Vere convinces them is practical. That his method of convincing must involve awing them with potent-sounding references further suggests the intrinsic unsoundness of his position.

Vere's manner of handling the court is peculiar. Clearly, his mind has been made up from the moment Billy struck and killed Claggart; his first words are, "Struck dead by an angel of God. Yet the angel must hang." He then calls the court, presumably to try the case. But when he hears the opinion of the men who make it up, he tells them in effect that they cannot proceed as they wish. Billy's appearance before the court and Vere's own testimony become hollow formalities when viewed this way. The close of his speech to the three members shows real impatience. "[w]hile thus strangely we prolong proceedings that should be summary—the enemy may be sighted and an engagement result. We must do; and one of two things must we do—condemn or let go."¹⁴¹

"Only we can't let go," Vere might as well have added, for thus he feels, and thus he forces the court to act. "Forces the court to act" is rather strong, but Melville makes this clear. To do so he uses, as noted and among other things, one of his favorite devices, the association between locale and status so important on board ship. For though as a witness the Captain sinks his rank, he physically maintains it "in a matter apparently trivial, namely, that he testifies from the ship's weather-side, with that object having caused the court to sit on the lee-side."¹⁴² Certainly his manner of handling the court confirms this ambiguous relationship; he is both a witness and commanding officer. He sets the court up, gives it enough irrelevant information—irrelevant by his own definition—to arouse its sympathies on the side of the Handsome Sailor, and then forces it, by calling everything but the blow itself irrelevant, to condemn. It is very much as though the court were somehow Vere's conscience. The reader is told that Vere did not have to call the court; he could have

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 238.

conceivably had Billy killed on his own authority, or he could have postponed the case for the Admiral. Clearly, Vere wanted to pursue the first path; the court is his conscience, and when it expresses its feelings, he overrules it.

VII

Scars and Stripes

Out, vile jelly!
Where is thy lustre now?

—*King Lear*

There are a number of uses of physical disability in the novel *Billy Budd*. These include the quarter-deck punishment Billy sees and resolves to avoid, the Ahab-like scar across the visage of the Dansker, the Great Tongue-Tie and the murder of Claggart, the momentary paralysis of Captain Vere, the death of Billy Budd, and the death of Captain Vere. Enough examples of disability and death in Melville have been discussed to make it possible to classify each of these.

Most of them have clear precedents in Melville, and are here used in fairly obvious ways. They are interesting in that they further demonstrate how closely *Billy Budd* is related to other novels. For example, earlier Melville offers a reader previous experience with fear of flogging. Billy, having seen a sailor punished, resolves to be a good boy and avoid flogging just as does White-Jacket. A chapter of *White-Jacket* is devoted to portraying the degradation of bearing the stripes of a flogging for life. Similar precedents exist for the Dansker's scar, which he rubs mystically when making one of his oracular statements. It is much like the rip across Ahab's face, and probably represents about the same thing—the dark knowledge of the evil of man and God. Actually the Dansker has fairly deep roots in earlier Melville; his type may be recognized by the superstitious fear other sailors have of him, and, often, by the same sort of physical mark which the Dansker bears.¹⁴³

¹⁴³ The Old Finlander on board the *Julia* in *Omoo*, for example, is supposed by the men to be a sort of "sea-prophet," and when he does make a prediction, it profoundly affects them. The *Julia*, at the time, is in a bad way, the captain an incompetent invalid, his mate a drunkard, and the men either sick or rebellious. Two of the crew die in one night, and on the same night, Van, the Finn, makes his prediction that

The “mometary paralysis” suffered by Captain Vere at the moment of Billy’s benediction is also easy to classify if one examines it from an obvious and factual viewpoint. Although it is not an especially important event in itself, discussing it provides a good illustration of the difficulties involved in trying to read too much into some of these incidents, and also an excellent example of the shifting and tentative nature of much of Melville’s prose here.

in less than three weeks not one quarter of the crew would remain on board ship.

Van is described as an especially good example of the sort of old Finn whom sailors superstitiously fear, and this sort of fear crops up again in *Mardi*. Jarl and the narrator (unnamed at this point) are on board the *Parki*, and having stumbled upon some biscuit, are seated on the quarter-deck gorging themselves. The old bread basket from which they’re eating, Melville says, is covered with inscriptions, including “divers mystic diagrams in chalk, drawn by old Finnish mariners, in casting horoscopes and prophecies. Your old tars,” he continues, “are all Daniels.”

Or all Elijahs, if one considers the sailor-prophet in *Moby-Dick*. Elijah is more fully sketched than the Finn one sees on the *Julia* or the Finns one doesn’t see on the *Parki*, and resembles the Dansker considerably, although the usage in *Moby-Dick* is, it must be confessed, a bit melodramatic, almost hammy. Elijah is as old, wrinkled, and scarred as is the Dansker, and has the same sort of understanding of the situation. As Billy is too innocent to understand Claggart’s malicious intent even when it is pointed out to him, so Ishmael has not yet sailed on board the *Pequod*, and can’t understand Elijah’s cryptic warnings. Beyond this similarity, though, the two are quite different. Elijah is a preaching prophet, chasing after Queequeg and Ishmael to warn them, while the Dansker seems more of an oracle, fixed by his age to his post near the mainmast, to be consulted when needed.

One other prophet-character should be mentioned, such as the eccentric man with a slate who, in the opening chapter of *The Confidence Man*, moves amongst the crowd at the St. Louis waterfront displaying his chalked maxims of charity. Yet, oddly, this prophet is less a precursor of the Dansker than of Billy Budd himself, for his physical disability is not a scar, but muteness, and his pose not knowledge, but innocence. More striking yet is the epitaphic judgement passed by one of the observers of this enigmatic figure—“Kind of daylight Endymion.” (Herman Melville, *The Confidence Man*, New York, The Grove Press, 1949, p. 16) Billy is, of course, in several ways an Endymion, particularly in his remarkable personal beauty. One might compare the scene in which white-clad Billy sleeps amid the dark guns of the main-of-war, “like a patch of discolored snow in early April lingering at some upland cave’s black mouth” (*Billy Budd*, p. 258), to that in which the cream-clad mute sleeps amid the deck-passengers, “motionless, as some sugar-snow in March, which, softly stealing down overnight, with its white placidity startles the brown farmer peering out from his threshold at daybreak.” (*The Confidence Man*, p. 15) It is also interesting that when Billy’s life itself passes into myth, the myth of the wronged Handsome Sailor of the doggerel ballad “Billy in the Darbies,” his death is spoken of in the terms of the central image of the Endymion myth, peaceful sleep.

Melville in his old age is foxy; he offers two explanations of what the paralysis may represent, and then fails to choose between them.

At the pronounced words [Billy's blessing] and the spontaneous echo that voluminously rebounded them, Captain Vere, either through stoic self-control or a sort of momentary paralysis induced by emotional shock, stood erect as a musket in the ship-armorer's rack.¹⁴⁴

Well, which is it? Knowing this would make it possible to trace self-control or emotional shock. Since it is not possible to know, one can at least find some common ground in which to dig: "Stoic self-control" of just what feeling, or "emotional shock" of just what nature? The passage can be discussed with certainty only on its most obvious level; it can be assumed that Vere is controlling his reaction to, or is shocked by, the very sight of Billy's death, regardless of its meaning to him. Here there is no difficulty; one can recall the repeated playing upon fear of death earlier noted in *Redburn*. All through his career Melville was enormously sensitive to death, and one may imagine that in an old man—particularly an old man still troubled by basic questions of faith—this sensitivity could hardly have lessened. The death of the martyred saint is to be an important event; with his own death obviously near, Melville must have been at least as sensitive as ever to death in general.

"I could never look at Death without a shudder," young Redburn had said, and in truth, neither could any major Melville character. Much as one might like to tie Vere's reaction into a general scheme of his own guilt, there is no real justification for doing so on the basis of the ambiguous little Melville has offered. Beyond the fact that death as death is always horrible in Melville, one knows very little at this spot.

A more important incident in *Billy Budd* involving physical disability is the tableau in Captain Vere's cabin, when Clag-

¹⁴⁴ Freeman, *Melville's Billy Budd*, p. 265.

gart confronts Billy. The moral implications of this encounter are discussed elsewhere in this essay; the approach at present should be from the limited technical point of view heretofore maintained. From this aspect alone the passage is climactic, for it represents a completely matured symbolic portrayal of a highly complex and emotional situation, embodied in an act which derives its violence from a meaningful physical handicap. One is immensely aided in examining and evaluating the passage by the fact that it is in several ways a reasoned re-thinking of a problem raised in *White-Jacket*.

The passage in *White-Jacket* occurs when the narrator, unjustly accused of neglect of duty by the officer who is himself at fault, has defended himself before the stern captain and been sentenced to a flogging.

There are times when wild thoughts enter a man's heart, when he seems almost irresponsible for his act and his deed. The Captain stood on the weather-side of the deck. Sideways on an unobstructed line with him, was the opening of the lee-gangway, where the side-ladders are suspended in port. Nothing but a slight bit of sinnate-stuff served to rail in this opening, which was cut right down to the level of the Captain's feet, showing the far sea beyond. I stood a little windward of him and, though he was a large powerful man, it was certain that a sudden rush against him, along the slanting deck, would infallibly pitch him head-foremost into the ocean, though he who so rushed must needs go over with him. My blood seemed clotting in my veins; I felt icy cold at the tips of my fingers, and a dimness was before my eyes. But through that dimness the boatswain's mate, scourge in hand, loomed like a giant, and Captain Claret, and the blue sea seen through the opening at the gangway, showed with an awful vividness. I cannot analyze my heart, though it then stood still within me. But

the thing that swayed me to my purpose was not altogether the thought that Captain Claret was about to degrade me, and that I had taken an oath with my soul that he should not. No, I felt my man's manhood so bottomless within me, that no word, no blow, no scourge of Captain Claret could cut me deep enough for that. *I but swing to an instinct in me*—the instinct diffused through all animated nature, the same that prompts even a worm to turn under the heel. Locking souls with him, I meant to drag Captain Claret from this earthly tribunal of his to that of Jehovah and let Him decide between us. No other way could I escape the scourge. [italics mine]¹⁴⁵

This is not an exact parallel to the crucial scene in *Billy*. Captain Claret, for example, is not like Vere, and the blow is intended not for a master-at-arms but for Claret. Yet there is a great deal here of interest. Most important is the fact that this obviously means a lot to Melville. The very emotional nature of his style—the talk of heart and manhood—is not usual in *White-Jacket*; such language is generally reserved for a very few crucial scenes. And it continues in the paragraphs following. This, for example, is obviously Melville saying something he feels very strongly:

Nature has not implanted any power in man that was not meant to be exercised at times, though too often our powers have been abused. The privilege, inborn and inalienable, that every man has of dying himself and inflicting death upon another, was not given to use without a purpose. These are the last resources of an insulted and unendurable existence.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Melville, *White-Jacket*, p. 1276.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

The whole frustrated and desperate air of these paragraphs parallels Billy's experience when unjustly accused by Claggart. But Melville was here writing a shorter novel, with a hero whose thoughts, even were they being recorded, could hardly be expected to sound like those of the relatively worldly White-Jacket. How then to express the same strong feeling of helpless blind revolt? Herman Melville solved the problem by using one of his best developed literary techniques, that of concretizing situations and emotions in physical defects. What in 1850 is put into many words is in 1890 quickly summed up in Billy's frustrating condition; his speech defect prevents him from answering Claggart's charges.

Melville's problem in *Billy Budd* involved, among other things, creating in Billy a figure who could represent a great range of ideas and conflicts. How to do this with this "cheerful and good-looking moron?" (The phrase is Alan Hymert's.) Certainly the physical defect was a brilliant step in this direction. Billy struggling to speak is expressing in terms of emotion and physical conflict what the more intellectual White-Jacket expresses in "I but swung to an instinct in me—the instinct diffused through all animated nature...."

VIII

Prophet and Disciple: The Deaths of Vere and Billy

Human nature does not change from age to age; the motives of action remain the same, though their relative force and the desires and ideals by which they are inspired vary from generation to generation. And thus it is that the moral judgements of a great poet whose imagination penetrates to the core of things, and who, from his very nature as poet, conceives and sets forth the issues of life not in a treatise of abstract morality, but by means of sensible types and images, never lose interest, and have a perpetual contemporaneousness. They deal with the permanent and unalterable elements of the soul of men.

—Charles Eliot Norton, Introduction to his translation of *The Divine Comedy*

Any critical theory which sees *Billy Budd* only in terms of an allegory tends to press a good deal of the humanity out of the three central figures of the novel. In order for Vere, Claggart, and Billy to be God, Satan, and Adam; or Horological necessity, the reality of evil, and the futility of Chronometrical selflessness; or, what is about the same thing, judgement, or temperance, evil, and good, the three must be flattened. They must be made to conform to patterns, the outlying dough of their inconsistencies—and, hence, reality—pressed firmly, flatly, and evenly into three cookie-tin stereotypes. Even were one of these sets of patterns obviously true, it would be still necessary to decide whether Melville approved of what Vere, be he God, the finger of god the King, or the realistic, pragmatic man, had done. And around this decision revolves a central dispute in Melville criticism—were the problems of Ahab resolved in the mind of the old Melville?

Actually, the variety of allegorical interpretations possible—and the two or three mentioned far from exhaust the

list—shows that there are not one, but several problems to be resolved. Ahab's quest was at once for knowledge, for the godhead, for justice. The same multiplicity exists in *Billy Budd*; each different set of labels one pins on Vere, Claggart, and Billy changes the problem discussed, and with each set arise the further complications involved in deciding whether or not the action of the novella produces resolution. If, for example, one calls Billy a Christ-like figure—and this, if one does not get too involved in subtle refinements, is one of the easiest of these theses to defend—Vere begins to look like unjust but unknowing government, and Billy's "God Bless Captain Vere" begins to sound like "God Bless Captain Vere, the poor mortal, he knows not what he does." The fact that so many of the elements surrounding Billy's death seem supernatural strengthens the analogy, as does the peculiar authority with which Billy pronounces his benediction.

Whether or not Melville had any specific analogy with Jesus or some other figure in mind, it is certain enough that he intends Billy to represent a rather different kind of being, something superior to the ordinary man or man-off-war's man. Billy is a foretopman; this alone gives him a position high in the caste-rating of the *Indomitable*, the same sort of rating which the members of Jack Chase's intimate group of demigods enjoyed. Something more, however, than high social ranking is implicit in Billy's character. Most striking is the series of events occurring at Budd's death. For one thing, the imagery of Melville's language shifts from the nautical to the biblical. The night fades into morning "like the prophet in the chariot disappearing in heaven and dropping his mantle to Elisha."¹⁴⁷ Or after Billy speaks his cryptic "God Bless Captain Vere," a mist in the east is thus described: "the vapory fleece hanging low in the East, was shot through with a soft glory as of the fleece of the lamb of God seen in mystical vision."¹⁴⁸ Then, "Billy ascended; and ascending, took the full rose of the dawn." The

¹⁴⁷ Freeman, *Melville's Billy Budd*, p. 263.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 266.

word rose may be intended in its religious connotations as the light of God, perhaps, as in Faust, angel-thrown.¹⁴⁹

The actions themselves are even more convincing than the language in throwing an aura of mysticism around the figure of Billy in these last chapters. Once again Melville is using physical conditions to express his abstract ideas, for the most unusual aspect of Billy's death is the fact that his body does not twitch after death. Just what is Melville's purpose is suggested in Chapter XXVII, the conversation between purser and doctor. In the course of their cool and gentlemanly chat, one learns that the lack of movement was caused neither by will power nor by natural means. It was, as the doctor says, phenomenal "in the sense that it was an appearance the cause of which is not immediately to be assigned."¹⁵⁰ What Melville is saying, of course, is that it was supernatural. Its effect is not lost upon the sailors, from whose ranks arises the inarticulate murmur which prompts Vere to order the Boatswain to "Pipe down the starboard watch."¹⁵¹

At the burial of Billy itself,

...a second strange human murmur was heard, blending now with another inarticulate sound proceeding from certain larger sea-fowl whose attention having been attracted by the peculiar commotion in the water resulting from the heavy sloped dive of the shotted hammock into the sea, flew screaming to the spot. So near the hull did they come, that the stridor or bony creak of their gaunt double-joined pinions was audible. As the ship under light airs passed on, leaving the burial spot astern, they still kept circling it low down with the moving shadow of their outstretched wings and the cracked requiem of their cries.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*; Melville's alternate wording, "shekinah," would seem to suggest this.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 271.

As we noted in the final scene of *Moby-Dick* and at various places in *White-Jacket*, Melville often uses birds as symbols of the supernatural. There can be no doubt that this is his intention here, for he says in his next paragraph,

Upon sailors as superstitious as those of the age preceding ours, men-of-war's men too who had just beheld the prodigy of repose in the form suspended in air and now foundering the deeps, to such mariners the notion of sea-fowl, though dictated by a mere animal greed for prey, was big with no prosaic significance. An uncertain movement began among them, in which some encroachment was made. It was tolerated but for a moment. For suddenly the drum beat to quarters....¹⁵³

Thus far then, whether or not one likes the Christ analogy, it must be admitted that, at least in the minds of the sailors, all the circumstances of the death of Billy Budd are conducive to Billy's becoming a sailor-legend. That the gun-deck of the H.M.M. *Indomitable* is fertile ground in which to plant the seeds of this new faith is demonstrated both by the events just described and also by the previous reaction to Billy's last words, at which time the crew members, Melville says, have "Billy alone...in their hearts"¹⁵⁴ as they echo him.

A discussion of the events of the remainder of the novel will suffice to show that the strain continues. Vere, having dispersed the men, calls them again to muster an hour before the usual time, and Melville contrasts Vere's cool reasoning with the near-religious warmth of what has transpired. "With mankind...forms, measured form are everything...."¹⁵⁵

At several places in *White-Jacket* and again in *Billy Budd* Melville has commented on the hypocrisy inherent in having a man of God on board a man-of-war. Now, as if to remove any

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 266.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

doubt that his tone is one of sarcasm he inserts the following two paragraphs, the first containing his usual caustic comments concerning the ship's chaplain (in himself, as is previously made clear, not a bad person), and the second, sharply contrasted, in the biblical language which he uses for most of the details of Billy's last hours.

At this unwonted muster at quarters, all proceeded as at the regular hour. The band on the quarter-deck played a sacred air. After which the Chaplain went through with the customary morning service. That done, the drum beat the retreat, and toned by music and religious rites subserving the discipline and purpose of war, the men in their wonted orderly manner dispersed to the places allotted them when not at the guns.

And now it was full day. The fleece of low-hanging vapor had vanished, licked up by the sun that late had so glorified it. And the circumambient air in the clearness of its serenity was like smooth white marble in the polished block not yet removed from the marble-dealer's yard.¹⁵⁶

The contrast between the faith growing up around the figure of Billy and the official faith of the man-of-war world is reinforced in the following chapters. The first describes the death of Captain Vere. In a naval action in which Vere's *Indomitable* eventually destroys the French line-of-battle ship, the *Atheiste*, Captain Vere is mortally wounded. Melville in describing Vere's death offers two puzzling statements. The first deals with Vere's character.

Unhappily he was cut off too early for the Nile and Trafalgar. The spirit that 'spite its philosophic austerity may yet have indulged in the most secret

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 272-273.

of all passions, ambition, never attained to the fullness of fame.¹⁵⁷

Vere ambitious? It just may be so. Far back in the novella (Chapter IV) Melville devotes several pages to a discussion of one of the aspects of the character of “The greatest sailor since the world began,”¹⁵⁸ Nelson. He carefully apologizes for his digression, and one might almost suspect that the chapter were irrelevant. What is under discussion is the advisability of a high officer’s placing himself in conspicuous danger in battle, and the conclusion reached, though rather tentatively, and in language so weak that it requires more than one reading to be sure of the author’s meaning, is that such dangerous heroism is approved by the codes of warriors even if the officer, by jeopardizing his person, puts his command, through the possible loss of its commander, in peril of being deprived of his leadership at the time when it is most urgently needed. If the leader is ambitious of achieving glory, such acts are probably necessary.

At Trafalgar Nelson, on the brink of opening the fight sat down and wrote his last brief will and testament. If under the presentiment of the most magnificent of all victories to be crowned by his own glorious death, a sort of priestly motive led him to dress his person in the jeweled vouchers of his own shining deeds; if thus to have adorned himself for the altar and the sacrifice were indeed vainglory, then affectation and fustian is each more heroic line in the great epics and dramas, since in such lines the poet but embodies in verse those exaltations of sentiment that a nature like Nelson, the opportunity being given, vitalizes into acts.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

Having thus concluded his digression, Melville returns to the subject previously under discussion, the Nore mutiny, and then introduces Vere. One wonders whether Vere is to be judged by the action of Nelson. Nelson, wounded, had his last order overruled by his second-in-command, with the resultant loss of life in the subsequent storm. Vere, wounded, has his lieutenant take command, and bring the battle to a successful conclusion. The incident is the only thing in the novel to which the earlier chapter could apply, yet Melville does not play up the possible parallel, except in intimating that Vere "may have" had dreams of glory. It is difficult to be sure, although one suspects that Melville, writing as concise a work as this, would hardly introduce an irrelevant digression. Melville plainly says that Vere is a sturdy, competent officer, though not at all brilliant; that Vere's reputation for bookish obscurity—especially as revealed in his habit of citing classical authors in conversation with those who obviously cannot follow his references—is probably deserved; that he is usually brave, but not reckless. His actions in handling Billy's case were, as noted, not very bright. It is not easy from such scattered intimations to reconstruct the man's personality, although it is possible hypothetically to align his motives in any specific incident. One could explain his treatment of the Claggart-Billy problem in terms of all the characteristics Melville offers. Lacking the brilliance of a Collingwood in insight into sailor psychology, and thus not really in touch with the most advanced and liberal thinking of the period on the subject of discipline, he could have felt that it would look best in the eyes of his superiors, and in terms of his "buttons of the King" line of reasoning, for Billy to be executed. Ambition fits into such a pattern all too well. It could account for Vere's feeling that for appearance's sake, Billy must die. But there can be no doubt whatsoever that the appearances Vere is concerned with are not appearances to his crew. For Vere really to believe that allowing Billy to live would damage the morale of the *Indomitable* would require that Vere be less than not brilliant, but positively stupid, which he clearly is not. As we have seen, the *Indomitable's* is a splendidly loyal

crew, and as both Vere and the captain of *The Rights of Man* know full well, Billy is a one-man morale commission, and a thoroughly good influence; it is for this reason that Vere had been planning to promote him. But although Vere's motive in insisting on the man's punishment may be partially selfish, Vere has a conscience, and although Melville clearly says that he has the power to have Billy executed on his own authority, this conscience makes him delay. The court is summoned to get some of the burden off his own chest. Certainly the dialogue of the trial reads like the mental dialogue of a citer of authorities pushing aside what is his own idea of justice with a great eloquent flow of argument, argument based on the naval law which the members of the court feel he knows better than they do ("they felt [Vere] to be an earnest man, one too not less their superior in mind than in naval rank"¹⁶⁰).

Melville's characters have the convenient habit of acting as Melville says they will act. One of Melville's earliest accomplishments as a novelist was the portrayal of characters in a believable and honest manner. This was true as far back as *Typee*, and was true even in regards to failings in those characters whom Melville obviously admired. When Melville said that Toby, in *Typee*, was erratic despite his generally splendid personality, he went on to show Toby as erratic. If Melville says Vere is sturdy but not brilliant, pedantic, conservative,¹⁶¹ and that he may be ambitious, this is what he should be expected to be.

The point is essential. One can speculate endlessly about Melville's style and symbolism, or about his ideas of man and God and society, but one's conclusions should never contradict a central fact which permeates almost all of his writing: the man is intensely honest, and because of the insight which he has into personalities, his treatment of his great characters is also intensely honest. Every competent introduction to Melville includes an explanation of how the Puritan consciousness of the reality of evil, still strong in the Calvinistic Dutch Reformed

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*; see p. 164.

Church of his youth, and reinforced by the shock of the "Redburn adventures," colored his metaphysical thought, and led Melville, who had lost certainty in faith, to wonder whether a God could exist who would allow to flourish such evil as he had seen. Yet this insight into evil has seldom been traced into the minds of Melville's characters, except when those characters, like Claggart, are so largely corrupted that the sense of Calvinistic predestination is obvious.

To fully understand any major and complex Melville character one must define Melville's idea of human nature. His insight is intrinsically Calvinistic. Man is by nature a complex being. His motives are contradictory and extraordinarily ambiguous. Within man's makeup exist contradictory tendencies, one of which seems recognizably good, another, selfish. The subtlety is here: at no time and in no person can one be sure that any action—no matter how unselfish it seems—is not at least partially motivated by self-interest. In extreme cases, this can produce an Ahab, whose selfish quest is obviously going to destroy the relatively innocent members of his crew. In subtle cases, it can lead Melville to inspect his own mind and the minds of trusted friends honestly, and admit, for example, that he suspected that Toby, after leaving Typee valley, had deserted him. A person aiding another may be doing so to aid himself indirectly, even if only in his own mind's concept of his own nature. The person acting according to what he feels are his true and selfless duties may show courage and stand by his convictions, and these convictions may seem selfless (because, perhaps, they even lower him in the minds of others), but even this person may have mixed selfishness in with his actions. Such a person, of course, is Pierre, who follows his heart in the Emersonian sense, but whose motives are not as pure as he sincerely believes them to be: his brotherly love may not be brotherly love, but incestuous lust. Melville is thus not only a Calvinist who has seen too much; he is also an incipient Transcendentalist who knows human nature too well (for Pierre's credo is Transcendental, and *Moby-Dick* is

written with the transcendental assumptions of a Thoreau as a basis for its symbolism).

And so Vere will not lay flat in a cookie-tin pattern; he stands out in broad human terms. He cannot really be solely a finger of God or a finger of the King because he is an individual. The very core of his argument before the drum-head court ("... do these buttons that we wear attest our allegiance to Nature? No, to the King"¹⁶²) is a rationalization, for Melville knows that the most duty-bound of characters owe allegiance to the Self as well as to the King. That Vere can utilize his erudition and his rank to convince the court is merely a circumstance. Vere's motives, like those of all Melvillian heroes whom the author has endowed with depth, are mixed.¹⁶³ Even if one is unwilling to accuse Captain Vere of an egotistical ambition, one cannot discuss his actions in purely allegorical terms. Melville's "may have" is enticing, and Vere "may have" been harboring dreams of glory which could, even unconsciously, influence his actions, but even were he not (and this writer, frankly, feels he was), he is human in the fullest Melvillian sense. Moreover, he has other failings. At least one of them made him proceed so erratically that a competent doctor had fears for his sanity.

The second of the puzzling moments in Chapter XXIX is Melville's report of Vere's dying words.

Not long before death while lying under the influence of that magical drug which, soothing the physical frame, mysteriously operates on the subtler element in man, he was heard to murmur words inexplicable to his attendant—"Billy Budd, Billy Budd." That these were not the accents of remorse

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 245.

¹⁶³ The only possible exceptions are some of the depthless allegorical figures in the latter portion of *Mardi*, and a few of the characters in the tradition of blond virgins leading to Billy. Lucy and Yillah, as embodiments of an almost unreal goodness which fades at the approach of evil, for example, are all embodiment and no flesh; they are flat, lifeless, and not even particularly well-handled. There is a good deal of this in Billy, but he is, fortunately, also the descendent of a lively and hearty line of Handsome Sailors.

would seem clear from what the attendant said to the *Indomitable's* senior officer of marines, who, as the most reluctant to condemn of the members of the drumhead court, too well knew, though here he kept the knowledge to himself, who Billy Budd was.¹⁶⁴

If these are not “the accents of remorse,” and if the “subtler elements” of Vere’s personality are being expressed, the words can be neither conscience-stricken brooding nor mere troubling mental retention of a traumatic experience. The first would be remorseful, the latter, not at all subtle. What meaning could be attached to Vere’s words which would not be remorseful and yet be subtle? If one likes the approximate analogy with Jesus, and considers the signs in the chapters surrounding the passage that a sort of faith is developing around Billy, the best explanation is that Vere, as a sort of Centurion-figure, has come to believe in Billy. “Billy Budd, Billy’s Budd,” as words of faith, are both subtle and unremorseful.

One must, of course, be wary of carrying such reasoning too far. *Billy Budd* is no formal allegory, and Vere is no more a complete Centurion than Billy is in all aspects Jesus Christ. Yet Billy, if not a Christ-figure, certainly has about him aspects of sanctity, and Vere is, even on a simple factual level, the officer who directs an execution that has all the appearances if not of a crucifixion than at least of a martyrdom. It is possible then, that Vere has become a convert. Certainly his death in battling the *Atheiste*, or unbelievers, a passage which has bedeviled so many critics, may be as well interpreted this way as any other. Although such an interpretation seems plausible, it is not necessary that one accept it in order to agree with the general interpretation here offered. The contents of the other of the last chapters are quite sufficient to establish the existence of an edifice of sailor myth that uses Billy’s death as a cornerstone.

A corollary of the idea of Billy as a martyr is, logically, disapproval of the system which wronged him. But even this

¹⁶⁴ Freeman, *Melville's Billy Budd*, p. 275.

is a bit too neat, for, as we've seen, it was not the system alone that wronged Billy, but the system as applied by the human, Vere. There is no denying that Melville leaves some confusion here. Any interpretation which tries to maintain allegorical consistency must fail in a novel which, besides being unfinished, contains a fully developed and deeply human character like Vere, whose own personality is continually asserting itself at places where allegory would demand that only the forces behind the man be evident. Push any such theory too far in such a novel and you find inconsistency.

Contradiction or no, Melville indicates he disapproves of what has been done, and continues to the last pages to show signs of the developing Billy-myth. Chapter XXX quotes from what Melville alleges to be the only printed report of the Claggart-Billy incidents. It is a sadly warped account; Billy is said to have stabbed Claggart when Claggart, loyal and discreet, arraigned him before the Captain for leading a ring of incipient mutineers. Melville, having apologized for his book's want of symmetry, introduces it as another of the relevant scraps of information which won't fit neatly into balanced form. He even apologizes for its inaccuracy by explaining that its author received his information mostly through rumors, and, after "quoting" it, adds the following quietly bitter paragraph:

The above appearing in a publication long ago superannuated and forgotten, is all that has hitherto stood in human record to attest what manner of men respectively were John Claggart and Billy Budd.¹⁶⁵

The apologies for want of symmetry are, of course, a sham; structural resolution requires these last chapters. For the present purposes, they serve to confirm once more quite a number of the ideas we have discussed. This is especially true of the final two, Chapters XXXI and XXXII. The one paragraph which F. Barron Freeman identifies as XXXI (30 in Hayford and Sealts) is worth quoting in its entirety, since, as noted earlier, when

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

Melville is writing of something he feels strongly, accurate paraphrasing produces no viable condensation.

Everything is for a time remarkable in navies. Any tangible object associated with some striking incident of the service is converted into a monument. The spar from which the foretopman was suspended was for some years kept trace of by the bluejackets. Their knowledges followed it from ship to dockyard and again from dockyard to ship, still pursuing it even when at last reduced to a mere dockyard boom. To them a chip of it was as a piece of the Cross. Ignorant although they were of the secret facts of the tragedy, and not thinking but that the penalty was somehow unavoidably inflicted from the naval point of view, for all that they instinctively felt that Billy was a sort of man as incapable of mutiny as of wilful murder. They recalled the fresh young image of the Handsome Sailor, that face never deformed by a sneer or subtler vile freak of the heart within. This impression of him was doubtless deepened by the fact that he was gone, and in a measure mysteriously gone. On the gun decks of the *Indomitable* the general estimate of his nature and its unconscious simplicity eventually found rude utterance from another foretopman, one of his own watch, gifted, as some sailors are, with an artless *poetic* temperament. The tarry hands made some lines which, circulating among the shipboard crews for a while, finally got rudely printed at Portsmouth as a ballad. The title given to it was the sailor's.

Confirmation that a sort of sailor myth is developing is inherent in the sailor's treatment of the spar; the crucifixion imagery is especially suggestive. It is also inherent in the language of the sentence beginning, "They recalled," in which Melville

employs a word he almost never uses, “image,” to suggest the start of a process of myth-making which has its next step in the ballad one of his shipmates composes. Billy is passing from man to fabled hero to image to myth. By the time he reaches myth, the facts are a bit garbled, but then so are most myths.

Confirmation that Vere, even under naval law, did not have to kill Billy comes in the subtly worked sentence beginning “Ignorant though they were.” “Ignorant though they were of the secret facts of the tragedy, and not thinking but that the penalty was somehow unavoidably inflicted from the naval point of view...” implies very clearly that were they not ignorant of the “secret facts” (And what can these be—Vere’s motives as he stood before the court it was not necessary to call?), they might not think the penalty so unavoidable. The sentence has the tone of assuming a private knowledge which the reader and the author share; “and not thinking but that” is another way of saying, “You and I, dear reader, know better.”

Even the continuities in physical technique are present in this quintessential paragraph. Where but in the foretop, favorite habitat of Chase, Lemsford, Ishmael and Billy, would one expect “to find such rude and sincere natural talent as is displayed by the tarry-handed composer of “Billy in the Darbies”?”

The poem itself, as the final embodiment of the myth, is all one could wish it to be. It is inaccurate, sentimental, and in a subdued way, bitter; without discussing any of the issues involved, it summarizes them all in the single line.

O, 'tis me, not the sentence they'll suspend.

But most notably, it is restrained, and in its restraint lies its irony. Critics of architecture have marveled at the Spartan restraint of the architect Mills, who in designing Baltimore's Washington Monument would not allow any embellishments or designs to mar the severe simplicity of his structure. Critics of literature may well marvel at this example of restraint in Melville. In all these last chapters, Melville describes and quotes, but never allows himself the luxury of explanation. Billy's death, the conversation between doctor and purser, the events at Billy's burial, the death of Vere, the article in *News*

from the *Mediterranean*, and the ballad are all offered without editorial comment. Melville had constructed a monument to a martyr of worldly injustice. Like Mills, he would allow no trappings to mar the severe simplicity of *his* structure. One may justly feel that in doing so he had also erected an image of his own late personality, restrained, apparently quiet and accepting, but beneath its exterior calm, thrusting one last towering unresolved question at the heavens.

Because of the subtlety and depth of characterization in *Billy Budd*, and because of the ambiguities in the relationships between the central figures, it seems almost impossible to construct any consistent detailed interpretation of the book in terms of allegory. I cannot imagine a pattern which, for example could work into its system of good and evil the fact that Claggart, in his most sinister act, acts innocently. Or, if Vere is to be a finger of God, whose finger is the Chaplain? Why are Vere's motives shown as being so complex? One can only move from allegory to symbolism, and the symbolism must be of a broad, sweeping sort, which does not set up each figure as an image of some abstraction, but rather views the book as one great symbolic event.

There was one central Melville type missing from the discussion of the characters in *Billy Budd*, and it is characteristic of Melville's frame of mind in these years that he was omitted. The figure, of course, is the seeker. Vere, who is said to possess a "mind resolute to surmount difficulties even if against primitive instincts as strong as the wind and the sea" has something of the seeker about him, but his seeking was misguided. By the time of Billy's death he seemed to realize this; he was, because his own motives intruded themselves, seeking a false god. The complexities and ambiguities of the world of the *Indomitable* preclude the possibility of any clearly defined types, the seeker included. Melville's symbolism at its most successful is broad, comprehensive. "Innocence and infamy, spiritual depravity and fair repute" are so subtly interwoven that one can only conclude Melville's message to be, "This is the way the world runs, and these the complex motives of men. One need be a

saint to live a true life in it, and it martyrs its saints.” Melville can seem serene only because he has learned to be detached. There is good reason for the absence of the seeker. This time the seeker wrote the book.

Appendix

Eating Whales

Drafted in the summer of 1953 between my junior and senior years as a Harvard undergraduate, my thesis was built on a paper I had written when I was a sophomore, as an extra-credit project for Arthur Schlesinger's justly-famous course in American intellectual history. Professor Schlesinger had devoted a lecture to Melville. He was not a literary specialist, but had done careful preparation, and offered us a summary of what he took to be the best scholarship on Melville. His talk concluded with the "testament of acceptance" interpretation of **Billy Budd**.

By then, I had read all the Melville novels, and thought that the "testament of acceptance" reading was wrong. With a sophomore's confidence, I churned out a fifty-page explanation of why I was sure that **Billy Budd** was no such thing. Grading in the course was done by graduate students, but Professor Schlesinger read my paper himself. He stopped me in the Yard one day to tell me, "You're right. You've convinced me. I've changed the lecture."

He turned up again as one of three examiners on my honors oral examination in History and Literature. I was surprised to see him: he was then most famous for his prize-winning book, **The Age of Jackson**. For the "special topic" portion of the exam, I had selected the so-called "Revolution of 1800." The Committee on Degrees in History and Literature had a sophisticated secretary; she had reworded my choice, the Jefferson presidential victory, into something like "The Triumph of Democracy," a label sometimes also applied to the election of Andrew Jackson in 1829. Because of this little misunderstanding, Schlesinger had been invited aboard. When he asked the first question about the Jacksonian era, I said, "I think I can answer that, sir, but why are you asking it?" And I explained that I had prepared for questions on "The Revolution of 1800." There was general laughter and some comments about the dangers of having too-smart secretarial staff, then Schlesinger went on: "OK—Was there a revolution in 1800?" and off we went.

He showed up again in the spring of 1954 at my thesis defence/final oral exam, where I learned that he had been one of the three readers of "The Craftsman's Memory." (He graded it **summa**.) And he was nice enough to remain in touch for years after I graduated. I ran into him once on Jayhawk Boulevard, the main drag of the University of Kansas campus, not long after I joined the Kansas faculty. (I came to Kansas in 1958, just after I completed my doctorate at Brown.) "What are you doing here, Professor Schlesinger?" He made his characteristic slight snuffing noise, then replied playfully, "And what are **you** doing here, Professor Levine?"

He went on to say that he came out to Kansas repeatedly, whenever he needed to work in nineteenth century newspapers; there is a great library of them in Topeka. He was in Lawrence again about a year later to give a famous speech in Hoch Auditorium in defence of academic freedom. After I founded the scholarly journal **American Studies**, he could always be counted on to lend a hand when I needed advice or an extra referee for a submitted paper.

Another of his lectures in the undergraduate course dealt with Reinhold Niebuhr. I believe that one of Niebuhr's books was part of our assigned reading. I was impressed with Niebuhr's understanding of human motivation; that impression is evident in "The Craftsman's Memory," especially in my discussion of Captain Vere. So my rereading of this ancient essay on Melville has made me realize that much of it grows from ideas from my connections with an open-minded and conscientious Harvard professor.

I have been told that the kid who wrote this honors essay in 1953 was the first to notice the innocence of a guilty man—that Claggart, when he goes to Captain Vere to accuse Billy, really believes that Billy is guilty. And I don't know whether my paper for Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s course was the first to question the "testament of acceptance" idea, though my examiners said flattering things about my approach to that issue. I am certainly not a Christian, but would be very surprised to learn that Christians believe that the meaning of the story of the crucifixion of Jesus is that the Romans did the right thing. Yet the "testament of acceptance" argument rests on just that illogic.

The methodical tracing of character types in the earlier novels to show precedents for the sailors on the warship in **Billy Budd** might remain useful. So far as I know, no scholar but the energized youngster who apparently memorized acres (better: fathoms) of Melville has sorted out all that information. I hope it will serve to save someone a lot of work.

"The Craftsman's Memory" was completed and evaluated by a committee in the spring of 1954, but actually drafted in the summer of 1953. I had been elected President of the Harvard-Radcliffe Orchestra. That meant not only practicing and performing on the French horn, but directing an independent corporation of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts: out of funds we earned ourselves, we had to hire and pay our conductor (and, alas, during my tenure, fire one and hire a new one), rent rehearsal and concert space from Harvard, purchase some instruments, run a chamber music series to make money, handle publicity and public relations and more. It was a big job—fifty unpaid hours a week, I had found in the spring semester of 1953. Realizing that I would not be able to do all that and also complete the extensive requirements (beyond course work) for an honors degree in History and Literature, I asked my parents to allow me to take a summer off from working in our family store. I sublet a graduate student's apartment near the Yard, and spent the summer working on the thesis.

A supermarket in the neighborhood sold whale steak! The price was reasonable; the world was not yet worried about vanishing whales, I figured out how to prepare it. Out of loyalty to Melville and Fleece, I ate a lot of whale steak that summer.

One aspect of the style of "The Craftsman's Memory" now seems stiff to me, but I can't entirely blame the whale meat. Somebody had given me a set of instructions warning me against "I," so that "It is the considered opinion of the undersigned investigator" might have replaced "I think." In 2013, I've edited out some of the stuffiness, but not all.

Another observation about the kid who wrote "The Craftsman's Memory." He was overly enamored with the semicolon; too often what should have been two sentences were linked. Blame Lincoln. Levine had read that famous sentence: "But I must say I have a great

respect for the semi-colon; it's a very useful little chap." Blame Herman Melville, too. Whether called the Bellipotent or the Indomitable, the heavily-gunned warship sails through a sea of semicolons.

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Typee, *Omoo*, *Mardi*, *Moby-Dick*, *White-Jacket*, and *Redburn*: Contained (along with *Israel Potter*, to which no references are made in this paper) in the order listed in *Romances of Herman Melville*, New York, Tudor Publishing Company, 1931. Because the reader may have other editions of these novels, I have located the more important references by chapter in the text as well as by page in the footnotes.

Secondary Sources

(Because of the specialized nature of the critical approach utilized in this paper, very few biographies or works of criticism are really relevant to my text. Those included here have been chosen primarily for the light they throw on closely related problems, particularly the old question of Melville's personality in these last years. Such a question is, as noted in the Introduction, quite beyond the scope of the thesis.)

Freeman, F. Barron, *Melville's Billy Budd*, New York, Harvard University Press, 1948. The first chapter of Freeman's introduction to *Billy Budd* is a competent discussion of

Melville's character during the period in which he wrote *Billy*. Freeman concludes that Melville had reached a kind of serenity and acceptance, and that he had become tranquil and optimistic. Tranquil and pessimistic would seem nearer the truth, for certainly his view of human nature, a factor which could hardly change in a person as honest as Melville, was as pessimistic as ever. (See my discussion of Leyda, *The Melville Log*). Yet Freeman is doubtless right in defining the apparent tranquility, a tranquility reflected in the comparatively quiet style of *Billy Budd*. It still seems to this writer, though, that if *Pierre* represents wild, impassioned doubting and questioning, *Billy Budd* represents quiet, detached doubting and questioning. Freeman's second chapter is a valuable tracing of possible factual bases for the events of the novella. It is not especially relevant here, though, since this paper deals primarily with techniques present in the early novels, not books Melville read, or events which befell him or his acquaintances. The third chapter, "The Creative Process," besides containing useful analyses of Melville's style and diction, contains interesting sketches of the three central characters. Freeman sees the depth of these people, notices their physical descriptions, and discusses their relations with one another. He does not, however, follow some of his findings to their logical conclusions. For example, though he feels that Vere, dying with Billy's name on his lips, has come to realize that "all the clear and cold intellectual truths of this world" are insufficient, he does not seem to realize the rejection of the accepted social system and its values that are inherent in such a statement.

Leyda, Jay, *The Melville Log*. New York, Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1951. To the old question, "What was Melville like during his last years?," this useful compilation suggests some interesting answers. First, it would seem that the shreds and scraps of recognition which Melville received as he lived quietly in New York must have been sufficient

to convince him that his works would live; he could not have been reconciled to *perpetual* anonymity. *The Academy*, August 15, 1885, carried Buchanan's poem of praise for Whitman and Melville, part of which ran:

While Melville, sea-compelling man,
Before whose wand Leviathan
Rose hoary white upon the Deep
With awful sounds that stirred its sleep.... (p. 792)

We know that Melville saw the poem. Did he have no deep satisfaction knowing that some few already recognized what he was? Such knowledge could lead, if anything, to a detachment from a present which seemed blind, but the detachment would not at all imply acceptance. The logic is Melvillian. If one's work is great, and if the present cannot realize that, does one just "enjoy" life "and not worry"? Perhaps, but one inwardly damns the present.

This could account nicely for the usual picture of a jolly, mellow old Melville, the Melville of whom it was observed in 1885, "his conversation had much of his jovial, let-the-world-go-as-it-will spirit" (p. 791). Listen, for example, to Melville discussing a photo of himself: "What the deuse makes him look so serious, I wonder. I thought he was of a gay and frolicsome nature, judging from a little rhyme of his about a Kitten ['Montaigne and His Kitten'], which you showed me. But is this the same man? Pray, explain the inconsistency, or I shall begin to suspect your venerable friend of being a two-face old fellow and not to be trusted..." (p. 793).

Two-faced is precisely right, though not in any hypocritical sense. No point troubling one's acquaintances with the battle still going on beneath that ever more lofty brow or that grayish hair. The passages he was underlining these days are revealing: "I think I am too great to be offended

by anyone in the world.... there are certain sentiments which I give or withhold; I cannot be false, I cannot play a part" (p. 815). "The world has neither pity nor respect, neither heart nor head; everybody forgets tomorrow the service of yesterday" (p. 830). "How came it that *Evil, King of the earth* [Melville's underlining], was born of a God supremely good in His essence and in His faculties, who can produce nothing that is not in His own image?" [*Your destiny is a secret between yourself and God*] (Melville's underlining).... "Ah! my dear lad, you have talent enough to be soon plunged into the horrible strife, the incessant warfare which mediocrity wages against superior men... Have a headache, and they'll say you are insane. Get angry and they'll call you a Timon... Slip, and you are down!" (Ibid.)

Matthiessen, F. O. *American Renaissance*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1941.

A wonderful book, which stands on a par artistically with most of the works it discusses. The Chapter on *Billy* contains hints about that novel's ancestry in Melville and a thoroughly balanced overall view of the book. The core of Matthiessen's insight is contained in the quatrain by Melville on Shakespeare

No utter surprise can come to him
Who reaches Shakespeare's core;
That which we seek and shun is there—
Man's final lore

which is the very essence of Melville's ability to retain detachment in the face of the "double-faced image of life." That does not, however, mean that Melville had "come to respect necessity," as Matthiessen says, for in *Billy Budd* necessity seems not quite necessary, and Billy can, even in his ignorance, rise above it.

Stone, Geoffrey. *Melville*. New York, Sheed and Ward, 1949.
His chapter on *Billy Budd* notes the inherent contradiction in the personality of Billy.

Thompson, Lawrence. *Melville's Quarrel With God*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1952.

Much as one may dislike Mr. Thompson's rather intuitive method, his interpretation of *Billy Budd* seems fairly near the truth. He does see contradictions in Vere's actions and character, for example, and may be right in implying that *Billy Budd* conveys approximately the same message as *Moby-Dick*, only more quietly. His complex system of what he calls "triple-talk," is, however, at least double-talk in itself and very much overdone. There may really be a sly aspect to *Billy Budd*, but the framework of the novella is not as structurally complicated—or as consistent—as Thompson would have one believe. What is probably nearer the truth is that Melville was still uneasy regarding matters of faith, and that this uneasiness, if it is reflected in *Billy Budd* at all, appears in the book's troubling ambiguities of character and situation. Melville's uncertainty could make him uncomfortable, but would hardly lead him to a career of taking pot-shots at the gods from behind a fortified wall of "triple-talk." He seeks, or questions; never sneers.



A self-portrait in watercolor of the author in his quarters in Leverett House, Harvard, at about the time he wrote **The Craftsman's Memory**.

Stuart Levine is Professor emeritus at the University of Kansas, where he founded the American Studies Department and the scholarly journal **American Studies**, which he edited for its first thirty years.

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Earlier in his career, Levine was a professional symphony musician and radio network music commentator.